



**When Teachers Face Themselves:
Enduring Outcomes of
Teachers' "Secret Stories" Lived and Shared**

by

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Statement of originality

I certify that this dissertation contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the dissertation, and to the best of my knowledge and belief it contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the dissertation.

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Abstract

This study sought to identify and understand the enduring outcomes, both personal and professional, for seven Tasmanian teachers who participated in an emotionally-demanding, highly experiential 3-day professional development workshop. MESH Support Group Facilitator Training (MESH) is part of a Student Assistance Program. MESH seeks to develop teacher participants' understandings about the issues impacting upon individual lives, in and out of school settings, and to develop in them the skills necessary to facilitate support groups in schools. In the process, teachers share their stories of challenging life experiences in a series of support group sessions, some of which they co-facilitate. This sharing of their own and colleagues' stories in a support group context draws on teachers' reserves of emotion, cognition, and personal and professional experience.

Despite early acknowledgement that teachers' personal and professional lives are inextricably linked, and that teachers' self-understanding is crucial to any effort they expend to help students to understand themselves, the personal-professional connection is one which is often neglected in teacher education programs and in-service professional development. Consequently, the importance of this study lies in its exploration of teachers' engagement with a professional development program that sought specifically to bring together the personal and the professional in participants' lives. Through this investigation, I sought to understand why teachers engage with the MESH program, and how their engagement impacts on their personal lives and professional practice.

Working within the field of narrative inquiry, I lived and worked alongside the workshop facilitator and each participant, 3-days-at-a-time, observing and field-noting participants' experiences in order to develop an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of the program, its impact, and outcomes. A series of three interviews was conducted with each participant: one prior to their experience to establish contexts and expectations, one following their experience to capture immediate responses, and one a year later to probe participants' memories and recollections, and to discover the ways in which they have drawn on that experience in both their personal and professional lives. Individual one-off interviews were also

conducted with the workshop's Australian facilitator and the program's US founder in order to provide contextualising data. Preliminary work that informed my methodology and understandings included a survey by questionnaire of 56 past participants, 9 of whom participated in focus group interviews. Additionally, I have drawn on my own experiences of participation in, and co-facilitation of, numerous MESH workshops during a 5-year period. These supporting data informed my analysis and interpretation of key participants' data. From these rich data sources, I constructed seven biographical narrative accounts which contextualise the individual teachers' participation, experiences and enduring outcomes.

These accounts trouble some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the person who is the teacher, re-presenting individual teachers' unique biographies and experiences, and revealing a diverse range of enduring outcomes – both personal and professional. Teacher participants described their affective, emotional engagement with their own and colleagues' stories as cathartic and transformative. For these teachers the enduring outcomes of their MESH experience included a transformation of their understandings about themselves and others; their relationships with family, colleagues and students; and their teaching practices. Teachers' experiences became a resource used by them to inform their self-understanding; their personal and professional lives and relationships; and improve their understanding of, interactions with, and support for, their students.

Findings of this study suggest that support groups provide teachers with a safe place in which they can share their "secret stories," and that this sharing is beneficial to their self-understanding, self-care and well-being. Findings also reinforce the need for teacher education and professional development programs to assist pre-service and in-service teachers in exploring their biographies, and, through this exploration, to make explicit the impact of biography on teaching practice.

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Teachers ... are *people* who happen to be teachers. Teaching is their job of work, their paid occupation. Whatever their motives for entering the profession, ... teaching and being a teacher is a part, not the whole, of their lives. It fits in, affects and is affected by other parts.

The things that happen to us throughout our lives have an influence on the sort of people we become, upon our perspectives, understandings and attitudes, our beliefs and values, our ideologies and philosophies, and the actions we take. Obviously, life experiences influence the sorts of teachers people become ... (Sikes, 1992, p. 39)

“Secret stories” ... are “stories told only to others in safe places both on and off the school landscape” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 7).

When one works individually with teachers and gives them a chance to share a little of that secret burden each of us usually bears alone, one can hear this same cry of pain and plea for help [as that arising from students]. This does not mean that pain is the only or the predominant condition in their lives. They know joy as well as pain. But it does mean that many who usually find it necessary to conceal their troubles and their hurts would like to find an opportunity to share them.

The hopeful thing about it is that they have the courage to utter this cry and to phrase this plea. (Jersild, 1955, p. 11)

PART I

The dissertation

Prologue – 14th November 2002

“Let’s go to group”

If you want to know me, then you must know my story,
for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know *myself*,
to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too,
must come to know my own story ¹

As a child, both in my family and at school, I felt different, as though I didn’t belong. Growing up in a family of four girls wasn’t always easy, and lots of comparisons were made between us. One of my sisters was stunning; slender and beautiful. Everything she did turned to gold. She was very athletic, and there were many things which happened that made it clear she was Dad’s favourite. He would spend lots of time with her, and I found that really difficult.

Compared with my sisters and school friends, I felt big, fat and clumsy. Over the years, I got the message that I wasn’t very desirable. I remember searching to find adoption papers, because I felt so strongly that I didn’t belong. How I learned to matter was by being clever, because that was something that I could do. And being smart was something that was very valued in our family.

As a teenager, I became increasingly down on myself and I didn’t need much encouragement from anyone to feel that way. Basically, I was pretty unhappy. I spent a lot of time thinking about suicide, because that was something that I saw as an escape from it all. I used to spend HOURS thinking about how I would kill myself and what would happen afterwards. And it was the “what would happen afterwards” that was what kept me alive. I used to wonder about what would happen if I could come back in spirit and see my funeral and I’d see that no-one turned up. That would confirm my worst fear – that no-one really did care. So it was the pain of that prospect that kept me going. That, coupled with the story of the Ugly Duckling.² The duckling had eventually found a place to belong and maybe one day I would, too. I used to think, “What if I ended it all now and there was a plan for my life, and when I was 23 or so things were going to get better?”

¹ (McAdams, 1993, p. 11).

² Written by Hans Christian Andersen in July 1842, and first published in 1843.

Mum had been increasingly worried about my mental and emotional well-being and I'd been sent to the school counsellor. She was a really nice lady, but all I remember being told was, "Look at everything you have. You're so clever. You have so much going for you. Look at all these fabulous things you've done. You've got so much potential." And all that did was convince me that no-one did understand. It just pushed me further into my shell. I remember being as rude as I possibly could be, going, "Nuh! Nuh!" which was pretty rude for me at the time, but seems funny now.

One day, on the way in to school on the bus, I think I just decided that the Ugly Duckling had better luck than I did and that it was all too hard and that I would kill myself. And living on a farm there were plenty of means of doing that, so I planned to kill myself when I got home from school that afternoon. Living out of town, though, there were no buses going home in the middle of the day, so I thought, "There's no point in going to class, so I might as well just wait for the bus to take me home." I went from the bus station, walked through the college, down to Royal Park and found myself a quiet spot and proceeded to wait until it was time for the afternoon bus.

There were 700 kids at LC the year that I was there in Grade 12, but my geography teacher must have seen me as I passed through the quadrangle on the way to the park. Geography was after recess, and, when I wasn't in class, Margaret asked my friends where I was. None of them had seen me. She must have realised that skipping class was very unlike me, because I was a good girl, an A-grade student. For whatever reason, Margaret became concerned and sent a couple of students to look for me. It took one of them quite some time to find me down in Royal Park, because it wasn't a place I would usually go. She said, "Margaret wants you to come back to class." And I said, "No, I'm not going." She said, "She said you have to." I said, "No, I'm not going." She stayed for about 5 minutes and then gave up and went back to class.

I didn't think any more of it until about 20 minutes later Margaret appeared. She'd come out of class to find me. I remember being completely blown away, that a teacher would come out of the classroom, over the road, and quite some way into Royal Park to talk to me. It would've taken her a good 10 minutes to walk that far.

I don't know that she said that much and I've no idea how she knew what to say. Maybe she'd been watching me for some time and it was obvious that I was having a rough time, I don't know. But she told me a story about her Dad, and I don't even remember the story any more. Perhaps about not feeling important, or not belonging, I don't know. But it was like she reached in and touched my heart like no-one else had been able to. I couldn't even tell you what happened in that moment, but it was transformative.

I don't remember whether I went back to class with her or whether I stayed there, but I do know

that I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for Margaret.



I am stunned by what I have just heard. The young woman who has just spoken is both beautiful and articulate. I've been deeply engaged with everything she's communicated to us all morning, and I'm aware that she has a magnetic quality that draws people to her. I find it hard to reconcile the fact that this young woman is the troubled teenager in the story she has just told us. And yet, I remember, only too well, growing up in a family of girls, being unfavourably compared, and my own adolescent belief that I was adopted. I, too, had felt that I didn't belong, and might be better off dead.

What is amazing to me too is that I *know* Margaret. She was my geography education lecturer at uni.³ As my lecturer, Margaret was a great teacher; someone I'd admired for her passionate engagement with her subject, her dedication to education standards, and her concerns for the future of education generally. She is well-travelled, out-spoken, demanding, and doesn't tolerate fools easily.

And now I am aware that there is more to Margaret. For whatever reason, she cared enough to act; she chose to reach out and connect with a fellow human being in need. And, in choosing to act, Margaret made a difference.



I tell that story because that to me is why MESH⁴ support groups are so important. I was a kid who would never have been identified as being in need of support because I "acted out" or anything like that. I was a good student. And, like me, there are so many kids in schools that have so much need who don't get identified, not because people don't care, but because everyone's too busy oiling the "squeaking wheels." And, unquestionably, the squeaking wheels need support, but everyone else has a right to it too.

And now I'd like to invite one or two people to share a story related to a challenging life experience.



My reaction to Nairn's invitation for someone to share a story with the group is visceral – Good grief! What on *Earth* am I doing here? Does she expect me to say something? This is just like one of those awful tell-all groups you'd see in soap operas and reality shows on television! What does this have to do with professional

³ Margaret consented to being potentially identifiable for the purposes of this study.

⁴ MESH is an acronym for mental, emotional, social and spiritual health.

development for teachers!? Did I misread the flyer? I'm not exactly sure what I was expecting, but this wasn't it! There is no way that I'll be saying anything!

No-one takes up her offer and, apparently unperturbed, she moves on to a warm-up activity; a name game, where Nairn is Natural Nairn and I am Tantalising Tammy, and I am relieved of any need to share anything more of myself with the group.



As I take my leave of the fifteen other group members at the end of 3 long days, I feel physically and emotionally exhausted. However, I'm aware, also, that I feel privileged and honoured to have been entrusted with the stories they have shared. I believe that, because of this experience, I'm taking with me a little of each of these people. I am sorry to go. Although I have rarely cried so much in all my life, as a group we have shared many laughs and I can say that the experience as a whole has been amazing and not at all unpleasant.

Despite my initial reservations, I eventually chose to share some of my own life stories, and, hearing them spoken for the first time, found the process to be highly cathartic. Together we have ridden the highs and lows of this emotional roller-coaster ride, and the experience has been one that has forged bonds between us.

This experience has been very personal; intimately so. I also believe that it *is* professional development.

Still, I have many questions which remain unanswered and cause me to think about this very different, very personal, professional development workshop. Like me, many people in the group have said that they have felt a part of something special. What about *others* who attend MESH PD? Does this happen for *them*? Does it happen *every* time? Are there enduring outcomes, and are they beneficial? And, if they *are* beneficial, in which way(s) – personal, professional or both? I want answers.

And, if I am to be completely honest with myself, I want to live the experience once again.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Beginning the journey: Going within

*I can only be still by quieting the outer world;
to observe the view of myself from inside.
If I do not go within, I go without¹*

This dissertation tells the stories of seven teachers who chose, for a while, to allow me to join them on their journeys along narrative pathways to personal and professional development. My quest was to determine the enduring outcomes for them, as they found themselves, just as I had done, sharing their storied lives seated in a circle of “strangers” at MESH. It is also a story of my own travels, as I sought to understand the experiences of these educators.

The MESH Support Group Facilitator Training 3-day workshop is promoted as professional development (PD) for people working in the caring professions. However, the approach to PD that I experienced as part of the MESH group, during those 3 days in November 2002, was different from anything I’d previously encountered. This approach seemed so different that I wanted to find answers to my initial wonderings, for myself, and for education.



Research questions

Building upon the original, informal questions I had puzzled over in the time immediately following my initial MESH experience, I developed one overarching research question and three supporting questions that have guided and sustained me on my research journey. My overarching question is:

What are the enduring outcomes for teachers of their participation in a 3-day MESH professional

¹ Psalms 5:146

development workshop?

The questions that support and help contextualise and further interrogate this overarching question are:

What are teachers' reasons for attending MESH professional development?

What is their lived experience?

In what ways do teachers draw on their experience in their personal lives and professional practice?

Unless otherwise indicated, the term “teachers” is used inclusively throughout this dissertation to represent professional educators – generalist primary school teachers, specialist high school teachers, school principals, and support teachers – working in a school context.



Serendipitous beginnings

Each of us has many stories. The decision about where and how to begin telling any story is not always an easy one. This research story is no exception, for the reader is entering this story in the midst of my story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

How did I come to be sitting, so confronted, in the MESH circle on that day in November, 2002? What reasons did I have to be there, and what had I hoped to gain? To discover the answers to these questions, I need to begin this story back some years.



Early in 1996, and seemingly quite out of the blue, I received a call from the principal of my children's primary school to ask if I would be interested in accepting a part-time position as a special aide to Stuart, a young boy with Cerebral Palsy and a vision impairment, who would be entering kindergarten that year. The principal wanted to employ an aide to assist the young student and his teacher for four mornings each week. On the fifth morning each week, he wanted someone who would be prepared to work one-to-one with children from classes up to Grade 4 who were having difficulty with reading.

At the time, I wondered how he had come by my name, when I had no experience of working with anyone with a physical disability. Two of my three daughters, however, had experienced difficulty with reading and I had attended a short course on the

Macquarie Reading Program and Macquarie Spelling Program that had been organised through the school.

My daughters were then aged 12, 10 and 7 years. In their respective preparatory years of schooling,² each of them had the same teacher, Alice Skirving. During three (non-sequential) years of almost twice-daily contact at the classroom door and some time spent as “mothers help,” Alice and I had often chatted together. I clearly remember saying to her one day that “being a teachers’ aide must be a wonderful job.”

At that time, Alice had an older woman as her aide, and, unbeknownst to me, she filed my interest away in the back of her mind. I’m aware now that her thinking had been that if her aide ever retired she would suggest me as a replacement. Years passed, however, and Alice’s aide had stayed on.

After all the intervening years, when a position had finally become available at the school, Alice had put my name forward.



And so, my life as a teachers’ aide began in the kindergarten class of that school, working with Stuart and small groups of children. For someone who had been a school-hater from reasonably early in my life, I was quite shocked to find that, as an adult in the classroom, it was easy to enjoy school. I looked forward to my mornings in the classroom, and found real joy in the many small steps that were made by Stuart and his classmates.

In my second year at the school, Stuart and I graduated to Alice’s Prep class. It was in that classroom, working with Alice and the children, that I began to want to be a teacher. What’s more, I began to believe that I could *be* a teacher. So, towards the end of my second year as an aide, I spoke to Alice about my hopes for the future. I was devastated by her well-meaning advice that I was too old.

Deeply disappointed, I put aside my dream and stayed in the classroom another year. However, the urge had become too great, and, at the end of that third year at the school, I left Alice and Stuart³ and enrolled in a Bachelor of Education course at the University of Tasmania. It was an uncharacteristically bold move for me.



² In Tasmanian schooling, a preparatory year precedes Grade 1 of formal education.

³ Stuart and I spent 2 years in Alice’s Prep class.

At university, much to my surprise, I found that I was in my element. My studies opened my eyes to a world of possibilities. I was like a sponge. I took in everything. As a mature-aged student – and terrified of failure – I studied hard, sweated over assignments, and over results.

My sweat paid dividends. I was recognised as a capable student.



When I neared completion of my education degree, however, I believed that there was still much more I needed to know if I intended to become a successful teacher in a contemporary classroom setting in my culture.

My pre-uni experiences as a parent to children with learning difficulties, and as a teacher's aide to a child with special needs, had left a legacy – a huge sympathy for students who struggled in an academic setting. During my school practicum experiences,⁴ I'd met some disengaged and troubled students. Students who felt hopeless, because they were aware that they were failing academically. Students who were excluded from classes more often than they were present in them. Students who were excluded by peers in class, and in the playground. Students whose parents lacked the emotional resources to properly care for themselves, let alone their children.

At about the same period, my teenage daughters had friends about whom I'd felt concerned for some time. One could only attend college on a part-time basis as she was also a carer to her single mum, who was regularly hospitalised for treatment of a mental illness. The other girl's father had been diagnosed with a progressive and debilitating neurological disease. Both girls had begun experimenting with cannabis use. These young girls were already struggling with the teenage predicament of developing independent identities (McAdams, 1996), while at the same time dealing with huge personal issues; issues many adults would find it difficult to face.

I'd become increasingly concerned by how little was being done to improve the educational engagement and life chances of these, and similar, young people. What seemed to matter most to school administrators, politicians, and in the media, were

⁴ The Faculty of Education took into account my experience as a teacher's aide, and I received academic credit for my first school experience. I spent those 2 weeks in the school in which I'd previously been employed, in a variety of (mostly primary) grades and classes. My second-year practicum was in a middle school class (Grade 7/8) in a district high school. My third- and fourth-year practica were in Grade 5/6 classes, both in suburban primary schools.

academic attainment levels. What *I* saw as mattering were these young people's lives and life chances. According to Nias, teachers commonly share my welfare concerns (1989a).

Even the experienced teachers that I'd observed had trouble managing the individual learning needs and diverse abilities of the range of students in their classes. How would I cope in similar circumstances as a beginning teacher with a class of, say, 32 students – classes such as those I'd experienced on my annual school practicum experiences? Classes where there was as much as a 9-year difference in students' ability levels. How would I find the internal resources "to accept and care for each student as a unique individual" (Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth, & Dobbins, 1998, p. 95), which is what I believe is important to student development?

The slow but steady gains in student achievement that I'd witnessed as a teacher's aide in early childhood classes were only possible because of the individual and small group attention those children received. I began to feel disheartened (Fullan, 1993); to believe that I'd never feel satisfied with what I would be able to achieve as a teacher with the responsibility to engage each and every child at an appropriate individual level in a class of over 30 students.

I began to think I'd done the wrong degree.⁵



Then, during one lecture in our fourth year core education unit, we were told by our lecturer about an externally-run, 3-day professional development workshop that was advertised as being relevant to people working with others in a caring role: "teachers, administrators, parents, counsellors, youth and family workers, and anyone involved in human services and relationships" (see *MESH Support Group Facilitator Training flyer*, Appendix A). The workshop promised to cover a range of topics, most of which appeared to be relevant to the concerns I had begun to realise. These included issues such as "change, learning, connectedness, relationships, optimism, smoking, family breakdown, anger management, bullying, drug use, absenteeism, crisis intervention, behaviour management, grief and loss, resilience, emotional intelligence and hope."

⁵ At this stage, it occurred to me that social work or counselling may have suited me better. I contemplated, too, whether I may have achieved more satisfactory outcomes for students "at the bottom end" had I stayed an aide.

As well as including a number of persuasive testimonials from a range of professionals who were identified by name and/or role, the flyer asked, “Are you adequately trained and prepared to support students dealing with these issues?”

I promptly enrolled in the PD.

So it was that I found myself in the city of Burnie, in north-western Tasmania, with 15 others – teachers, social workers, Aboriginal support officers and community workers – early on the morning of 14th November, 2002. What I *hadn’t* been prepared for was that, during those 3 days, we would all participate in eight support group sessions. Furthermore, by the end of the 3 days, we would each have had the opportunity to co-facilitate one or more support group sessions as part of the process of learning to facilitate similar groups to support students in schools.



Once I recovered from the initial shock that I had experienced at finding myself in a support group, I became fascinated by the group process, and by the response the PD received from the other professionals present. I hadn’t been the only person surprised by the workshop’s format, nor was I the only person who acknowledged that we had all been transformed in some way by our shared experiences over the course of those 3 days. What is more, I felt intrigued enough about these experiences to want to find answers to my questions.

Day and Leitch (2001) have wondered:

- (1) How is the professional self of the teacher affected by personal histories?
- (2) Can in-service courses assist teachers in adding self-knowledge as a means of increasing understandings of the ways in which emotion as well as cognition affect their teaching lives? (p. 404)

Further, Walker and Goodson (as cited in Goodson, 1992a) have asked:

What would a project look like if it explicitly set out to change the teachers rather than the curriculum? How would you design a project to appeal to the teacher-as-person rather than the teacher-as-educator? What would be the effects and consequences of implementing such a design? (p. 117).

I believed I’d found such a project.

Furthermore, I believed that I had found a program that could make a difference to students’ lives, which is what had initially prompted my interest in the PD.

I was hooked!



Pre-study discussion and negotiation

I discussed my initial fascination, and interest in studying the MESH PD workshops, with Nairn Walker, the Tasmanian facilitator of the training. She invited me to attend additional training workshops⁶ in order to more fully acquaint myself with the processes involved, prior to making any commitment to a study. This immersion in the MESH workshops and support groups granted me the opportunity, time, and familiarity to make decisions about, and refine the focus of, this study.

Throughout my initial experience, and this early, pre-study, engagement with MESH PD workshops, I had borne witness to the telling of many meaning-full stories. My MESH experiences had prompted self-reflection, and brought meaning to aspects of my life I'd not previously thought to reflect upon. I came to understand more fully the impact of my biography on my self. Similarly, I'd observed what I believed was meaning-making happening in the lives of other MESH attendees.

My original fascination with MESH, and my subsequent experiences of the program, led me to make the decision that, instead of taking the more-travelled route from initial teacher education into the classroom, I would continue on to further study and complete a doctorate.⁷

I felt that this topic was *worthy* of study, not only to satisfy my own curiosities and puzzlements, but also because I believed that the understandings about the human condition that I had developed, and witnessed others develop, through engagement with the MESH PD, were germane to teachers. And, just as importantly, to the children and young people with whose life development they are entrusted.



Dissertation orientation

This research text does not conform to a traditional scientific report format, a format which can limit “the strength of argument that narrative researchers can produce” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 477). Rather, I have chosen a slightly less conventional, two-

⁶ Enrolment in my first 3-day MESH professional development workshop in November, 2002, cost me AU\$395.00. Nairn's invitation was for me to attend more workshops without charge. I gratefully acknowledge her generosity, without which this study would not have been possible.

⁷ I was aware at this time that I had the potential to qualify for an APA scholarship which would fund my doctoral study for 3 years. “Finding” this topic at such an opportune time was fortuitous.

part presentation of my research text. *Part I* contains the dissertation itself, while *Part II* describes the making of the dissertation. These parts are structured as follows.

Part I: The dissertation

The *Prologue* has served to introduce the reader to my first, personally challenging encounter with a MESH workshop support group. It also provided a storied account of Nairn Walker's biographical connection to the program she now facilitates.

Chapter One has provided an autobiographical account of my journey prior to undertaking this study, as a means of locating myself within the research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121; Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). In this chapter, I have also detailed my emergent interest in MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops.

A background to the MESH Support Group Facilitator Training PD program is provided in *Chapter Two*. Two storied accounts tell of the genesis of the program in the US, and its migration to and implementation in Tasmania. Then, in a descriptive account, I orient the reader to the processes encountered by workshop participants. This chapter also engages the reader with the student outcomes of the program as reported in the literature, and acts to identify the "gap" in the literature which is the focus of this study; teacher outcomes of the 3-day MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops.

In *Chapter Three*, I provide a review of the literature relevant to this dissertation, presented in three sections. The first of these sections explores the nature of teachers' work. My particular focus here is on the impact of educational and societal change on teachers, influences that have positioned teachers to increasingly engage in a form of "social work" with their students. In the second section, I explore the concept of the teacher-as-person, and explore teaching as a vocation that is simultaneously intrapersonal, interpersonal, and emotional. I highlight the important influence of teacher biography and teacher self-knowledge on teaching practice and teacher-student relationships. This leads to a consideration of the literature on teachers' commitment to their students and the influence that teachers' caring orientation has on their occupational well-being. The section concludes with a discussion of the need for recognition that teachers' personal development is an integral aspect of their professional development. In the final section of the review, I

examine the literature relating to the role that story-telling has in the creation of self. Next, I examine the ways in which critical incidents are integrated into the life-story, and highlight the value of raising stories to consciousness for critical reflection. Finally, the act of self-disclosure, and the benefits that accrue from storytelling and storylistening are considered.

Chapters Four to Ten present the biographical narrative accounts of the seven teacher participants in this research. In these accounts, I narrate the experiences of these participants in order to address my research questions. The seven accounts provide descriptions of the contexts within which participants enrolled in 3-day MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops, their experiences during the PD, their reflections on participation, and the enduring outcomes they believe derived from their participation. The narratives demonstrate the transformative effects of self-disclosure and storylistening, as well as the interconnectedness of teachers' personal and professional lives, and the impact of teacher biography on teachers' attitudes, beliefs and reported practice. A *Readers' Guide* to interpreting the visual presentation of the accounts through varying font usage is outlined in Appendix B.

In the *Epilogue*, I draw together and summarise my learning in respect to the research questions. Conclusions drawn from the narrative accounts of the seven key participants are supported by my experience of living alongside Nairn Walker and numerous workshop participants 3-days-at-a-time during MESH workshops over a period of 5 years. Together, these data illuminate the enduring outcomes of teachers' participation in the MESH Support Group Facilitator Training PD program. Next, I contemplate some of the resonances, tensions and paradoxes inherent within this research project. The ways in which this study is significant, its potential contribution, and ideas for further study, are also discussed. Then, I provide a reflection on the personal and professional outcomes for me of my numerous MESH experiences. I close with a coda up-dating readers on more recent developments in the lives of each of the research participants.

Part II: The making of the dissertation

In the *Methods* chapter, I discuss my theoretical perspective and narrative inquiry epistemology. I also detail the methods, strategies and processes I employed to recruit participants to the study, and to generate, analyse and transform data. I address issues pertaining to my role as researcher, including the steps I took to

maintain my participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. Finally, I discuss the ways in which I have addressed criteria by which the trustworthiness of this research may be evaluated by the broader research community.

Engaging with the text

Although I have chosen to present this account of my research in two distinct parts, readers may choose to engage with the text in whichever way best satisfies their interests or purposes. It is suggested, however, that the *Prologue*, *Introduction*, *Background* and *Literature review* are read in the order of their presentation. Essentially, the dissertation is structured in such a way that it will suit readers who are keen to engage with the biographical narrative accounts before learning of the processes I undertook in order to generate, analyse, interpret and re-present the data.

For the benefit of readers who prefer to engage with methodological matters prior to reading the biographical narrative accounts (*Chapters Four to Ten*), I suggest an alternative reading order. Following the *Literature review*, these readers may choose to turn directly to the *Methods* chapter (p. 304). Readers who choose this alternative progress through the work may then re-turn to read the biographical narrative accounts (p. 93). Table 1 provides a comparison between these two approaches.

Dissertation order as presented	Alternative reading order
PART I: The dissertation	
Prologue	
Introduction	
Background	
Literature review	
Biographical narrative accounts	Methods (p. 304)
Epilogue	Biographical narrative accounts (p. 93)
PART II: The making of the dissertation	
Methods	Epilogue (p. 277)

Table 1 – Suggested, and alternative, chapter reading order options.

Chapter 2 - Background

MESH Support Group Facilitator Training

What the eye sees better the heart feels more deeply. We not only increase the likelihood of our being moved; we also run the risks that being moved entails. For we are moved somewhere, and that somewhere is further into life, closer to those we live with. They come to matter more. Seeing better increases our vulnerability to being recruited to the welfare of another. It is our recruitability, as much as our knowledge of what to do once drawn, that makes us of value in our caring for another's development¹

This dissertation is a narrative account of the enduring outcomes for teachers of their participation in a 3-day professional development workshop. MESH Support Group Facilitator Training is part of a suite of programs, known as Student Assistance Programs (SAPs). The SAPs initiative has been the focus of studies investigating student outcomes over a number of years, primarily in the US. The focus of this study, however, is the outcomes for teacher participants in SAP Support Group Facilitator Training workshops. As the name suggests, the purpose of these workshops is to educate people to be able to facilitate support groups for their students. Support groups are groups that “meet for the purpose of giving emotional support and information to persons with a common problem”² (Kurtz, 1997, p. 4).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide accounts of the development of one SAP in the US by Cheryl Watkins,³ and of how the program was adopted by Nairn

¹ (Kegan, 1982, pp. 16–17).

² During the training, the use of the word “problem” is avoided, because of its negative connotation, and the assumption that for problems there are solutions. Instead, the use of the word “issue” is favoured.

³ Cheryl Watkins, MA, is now executive director of the Chemical Awareness Training Institute in Phoenix, AZ. She has acted as a consultant to the National Organization of Student Assistance

Walker, a Tasmanian school teacher, who has since become the Australian trainer for this program. This chapter also provides a descriptive account of the processes that participants experience during the 3-day workshop, and contextualises this study in relation to studies that have investigated the influence of SAPs on student participants.

The *Prologue* and *Introduction* have introduced two of the protagonists in this account – Nairn Walker and me. This chapter begins by recounting the experience of Cheryl Watkins,⁴ another protagonist.



Being recruited to the welfare of another – Cheryl's experience

In October 1980, Cheryl Watkins was a teacher in Arizona, with 12 years' high school teaching experience. One day, as part of a prescriptive state curriculum offered by her school, Cheryl had shown a video on alcoholism to her year 10 health class.

The story was about an alcoholic mother and her daughter. The movie had me in tears! At the end of the film, a girl named Kay, who was in the top 2 percent of her class academically, was crying in front of my desk and pointing to the screen, saying, "That's my mom, and it hurts so bad. Can you help me?"

I had no training and didn't know what to do, so I referred her to the school counsellor who also had no training in this matter and referred her on to the school social worker. The school social worker pulled out her 12-step meeting book and told Kay there was help for her. "Just go to an Alateen⁵ meeting!" she said.

Kay was very bright. She asked the social worker, "How can I get there? I don't drive. Will my mother let me out of the house to go to a meeting to deal with her drinking? I don't think so! Most of all, when could I go? Do you know who the mother of this house is? I'm the mother! I take care of my brothers and sisters, make sure they do their homework, and stay up all night watching my

Programs and Professionals (NOSAPP) and been a board member of the National Association of Leadership of Student Assistance Programs (NALSAP). In 1987, she was named National Student Assistance Professional of the Year. Cheryl has also published articles on Student Assistance Programs (see, for example, Watkins, 1989; Watkins & Chatfield, 1995; Watkins, 1986).

⁴ I recruited Cheryl Watkins to the study via Nairn Walker (third-party recruitment). Data for this narrative was generated from a single interview conducted by e-mail (see p. 328 of the *Methods* chapter for further details). Cheryl consented to being identifiable for the purposes of this study.

⁵ Alateen is part of the Al-Anon fellowship, and is a recovery program "for the younger relatives and friends of alcoholics through the teen years" (Al-Anon/Alateen, 2006).

mother when she drinks and smokes so she doesn't burn the house down. When could I go?"

Kay did not come back to my class for 2 weeks and when she came back it was like looking at the walking dead – a body with no-one inside. I asked Kay, "Where did you go?" I was not asking about her absences, but where did she go inside? She proceeded to tell me about her suicide attempt and waking up after 4 days in a coma. She went on to tell me about the psychiatrist who asked her why she would want to take her life. She said for the fourth time – "My mom's an alcoholic."

The psychiatrist went next door to ask the mother if it was true. Kay's mother denied the accusation, said she loved her daughter, and was not an alcoholic. The psychiatrist returned to Kay and told her that her mom was not an alcoholic, because she told him so!

I often wondered how Kay must have felt after reaching out for help so many times. So much for education and the helping professionals! Did we all look at her as the problem? Or could we have the courage to know that we all let her down and didn't know how to help her. I also wonder how many educators were at one time in her shoes, and no one heard their cries for help.

I felt a tremendous responsibility as her teacher and the adult she reached out to. Her story and pain deeply touched me. My principal said, "Why did she not come to me?" He was baffled! I asked him if I could start a small support group to help Kay and other students, who, like her, were desperately struggling. He was open to letting me start a group, as long as it was kept quiet. That was brave, because no-one else in the state had ever sought to address such an issue.

Kay then asked her favourite teacher if she could miss her class once a week to attend the weekly support group. The teacher said "NO! You can't miss my important film today and your grades have dropped from an A to an A-."

I was extremely upset as I entered the teacher's classroom, and said "You can't do that! She almost died!" Her teacher said, "I don't care, why did you pick my class for her to miss?" I started to cry. I felt totally powerless to help this girl.

Cheryl's feelings of powerlessness ended that night. Her passionate belief that schools should do more to support students like Kay caused her to begin rewriting her school's policy documents. In that revised documentation, she included support for a comprehensive program to address emotional and mental health needs of students. Cheryl's lobbying also ensured that her initiative would later be taken up by all schools in the district.

The entire SAP program was created from experiencing what wasn't there. The basic elements were put in place: (1) Advisory Board; (2) District policies and procedures; (3) Education of all staff; (4)

Identification and referral systems; (5) Support groups that meet in school, during the school day (6) Prevention activities; (7) Education and support of parents and community; (8) Curriculum infusion; (9) Community networking; (10) Program evaluation; (11) Program leadership at the district and school level; and (12) Staff wellness.⁶

That's how it all started. I will never forget Kay. We were destined to meet. It was looking at her face every day – not knowing if she would come back alive the next – that drove me to create the program. She was my inspiration to start the program and she was also the inspiration to begin my own healing journey. As I learned how to help Kay, I learned how to help myself, my loved ones, my staff and my friends.

As Margaret Mead said so well:

The solution of adult problems tomorrow depends in large measure on the way our children grow up today. There is no greater insight into the future than recognizing when we save our children, we save ourselves. Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

It's been an amazing adventure!

Since that time, under Cheryl's guidance, the program has become a state and national model, recognized by school districts throughout the US. In addition, Cheryl has been involved in the development of national and state school substance abuse legislation. Subsequently, the training program she developed has been adopted in approximately 50 states in the US and 30 countries, including Australia.

Cheryl believes that the program she developed *changes the heart and our relationships with ourselves and each other. It is a universal program that brings humanity together as a human family.*

SAP has become my life work. I never dreamed it would go around the world. I also continue to grow and learn more as life changes. I have used everything I teach in my own life with the people I love. So, my life is one of continual growth. I have also had the privilege to mentor others, who are starting where I was 25 years ago.

Nairn Walker is one of those whom Cheryl has mentored.



Seeing better – Nairn's experience

Since my first experience of the MESH program in November, 2002, Nairn and I

⁶ These elements are listed and more fully documented in the Student Assistance Program Training

have travelled, lived and worked alongside each other, 3-days-at-a-time, during numerous MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops throughout the Australian states of Tasmania and Victoria. As a result of the friendship that developed between us during this time, I was already familiar with Nairn's story of her early engagement with the Student Assistance Program in the US. However, in order for me to be able to re-tell her story for the purposes of this study, we sat together one morning, in the light and airy comfort of her home, and I recorded her story as we talked together about her experience.

Like me, Nairn had a serendipitous introduction to the program.

In 1997, Nairn was teaching at Smithton District High School, on the North West coast of Tasmania. *It was a beautiful place, and I loved it; the kids were so good and I really enjoyed being part of the community. I was really enjoying things at school, but had this sense of "I'm just going through the motions;" I felt like I was just "doing time."*

I've got a friend who's passionate about the violin, and I've always admired her passion. And for a long time I was really passionate about wanting a passion. I could see that her passion gave her life so much meaning, and she was excited every day. Whenever she talked about the violin she was so inspired and excited. And there was stuff I used to get excited about, but there was nothing that was a driving force.

Looking for new opportunities and experiences that would bring added inspiration to her teaching, Nairn applied for and gained a Rotary Foundation Group Study Exchange scholarship to Arizona in the United States.

Nairn had said to a friend, *"When I come back from Group Study Exchange, I'm gonna know what I'm gonna do with my life."* I had no rational cause for saying that, but I had this sense of conviction that that would happen.

Together with other scholarship recipients interested in developing their understandings of their own professions, Nairn travelled to Arizona to study teaching. Her particular interest was in finding ways to increase her students' engagement with learning.

We had a really nice time, but it was just that; it was a nice time. The people were just incredibly hospitable and so gracious and generous, but it was like one big holiday, and a big party, which was all very fabulous, but at the end of the day, the 6 weeks finished and I felt, "Oh. Oh, that's it." I

was basically gonna go back and say, "Oh, it was really good, but" And I was feeling a bit guilty that I hadn't, vocationally – given that it's a vocational exchange – that I hadn't actually learned that much.

What I'd come out of the 6 weeks with was a recognition that Tassie was way ahead of the ball. That we, educationally, were practising a lot of what they were just coming to – struggling to just start articulating around criterion-based learning and collaborative learning and all that sort of stuff.

On my Rotary "wish list" I had put that I wanted to see a particular author, Dick Sutfin, who was based in Scottsdale, Arizona. He's a new-age guru, but I'd really wanted to see him, 'cos his books I just loved. I'd thought, "Awesome! What an opportunity." Believing, at that time, that Rotary was a reasonably conservative organisation, Nairn had been careful to couch her request in terms of education. Rob, the Rotarian appointed to make sure that the people on exchange got their wish lists met to the greatest degree possible, had done everything he could to find out who Dick Sutfin was. He'd asked people everywhere. No-one knew him. And 5 weeks into our 6 week exchange there was a big cocktail party; the District Conference. We hadn't seen Rob for a month but we met up with him, and he came over and he apologised profusely. He said, "Look, I am so sorry. I did everything I could to try and find that man. I've asked literally hundreds of people, but yesterday I came across a guy who's heard of Dick Sutfin." And Rob's wife, Rose, who was standing next to him, said, "Dick Sutfin? Honey! I go to his retreats. All his books are on our bookshelf! What are you talking about? He's in Sedona!" She said to me, "I could've got you to meet him." It was just amazing. Rob couldn't believe it. It was so funny, 'cos he'd asked everybody BUT his wife! He could've sorted it out instantly. But we'd already been to Sedona.

As it turned out, Rob's contact had said, "If she's really into all that kind of stuff, I know some people in the education department I could hook her up with for a vocational visit." And so that's what happened. The second-last day of the exchange, Rob and I spent the morning with a music therapist, Sammi Whytecap, and the afternoon at a different school, with an art therapist, who worked with kids in schools to address their emotional needs.

Sammi Whytecap, the music therapist, showed us around a school and talked about it, and they were doing great stuff, and right at the end of the meeting she said, "When does this exchange finish?" And I said, "Tomorrow." And she said, "Oh, that's a pity!" And I said, "Why?" And she said, "Oh, there's just this thing and I thought you might've been interested in it." And I said, "What is it?" I don't know what it was, but something just, I just kept on asking, and she said, "Oh, it's just this support group program. I'll find the flyer for you." On the front it just said, "Student Assistance Program," and it had the date, "11-13th June, 1997."

Nairn recalled that at the time that she had booked her flights to and from the US, the Rotary travel agent had asked, *“When do you want to come back?”* She hadn’t minded, except that she was expected to be back in Smithton for the start of Term 2 on the 16th June. *The agent had said, “How does the 14th sound?” I said, “Yep, okay.” We just pulled a date out of the air.*

Anyway, this was the 11th, 12th, 13th of June, and I was coming home the next day. So, I just knew, I said, “Yep, okay, I’m going.” Didn’t know what it was. Opened up the flyer and it had all this stuff: children of dysfunctional families, feelings, meeting the emotional needs of kids. “Yep, I’m definitely going.”

And so for the next 3 or 4 weeks I hung around, basically waiting for this group. I was so homesick, and I think it was probably because Shane and I got together before I left for America, and I remember saying to him the night before the course, “This course had better be good, because I’ve basically hung around waiting for it.”

I stayed with the District Governor of Rotary, and he dropped me off at the course, and picked me up that afternoon. And he said, “Well, how was it?” And I said, “Oh, Rob, it was fantastic! It was really good!” And he said, “You should take this back to your schools in Australia.” And I said, “Rob, I’d be happy if I could just get this into my school.” And he smacked his hand on the car steering wheel and said, “You Tasmanians, you’re all the same! You think like this!” Nairn circled her forefinger and thumb around each other making a narrow window. He carried on about the natural resources, the business opportunities we have, and he got so frustrated. I was like, “Rob, Rob, you don’t understand. I’m just, you know, I’m just a teacher.”

When he said that [about thinking in too narrow a way], it didn’t mean anything to me. I see now what he means.

Nairn returned to Tasmania, and her teaching position in Smithton, and *trialled support groups with the kids in Grade 8, through the MARSSS program,⁷ and my Grade 11 class.* A few teachers at the school were interested in the student outcomes they were observing, and asked, *“Would this lady teach us? Do you think she’d come out from America*

⁷ “Managing and Retaining Secondary Students at School (MARSSS) was a major education initiative in the [Tasmanian] State Government’s Budget for 1996-97. This program was to be funded for a three-year period. A Government media release of 15 August 1996 stated that the program would be managed by principals of schools and give particular attention to students with a record of multiple suspensions, or exclusions, and to students who were chronic non-attenders or who were members of educationally disadvantaged groups. The program was designed to be an integral part of schools’ overall approaches to behaviour management and to demonstrate a close relationship with the schools’ existing supportive school environment procedures and practices rather than to be an ‘add-

and train us?” And I’m like, “Oh! Maybe. I don’t know.”

Neither Nairn nor the other teachers had organised anything of this magnitude before. *It was all, “Oh! What do we do and how do we do it?” The PD committee put an application for five people from the school to do the training. We wrote a cover letter and put together a little flyer. We sent it to all the MARSSS coordinators [in Tasmania]. We had the very first MESH ever in Australia; we had 18 people. Most of them came from the North West Coast. And it was funny, because I had no intention of it happening. I wouldn’t have dreamt of getting Cheryl out from America. It would not have been part of my thinking at all, that it was even possible to do that.*

In mid-September that year, Nairn was asked by a colleague, *“What do you want to do next year?” I’d just finished [facilitating] a group with my kids, and it was just amazing, and I said, “Oh, my dream job would just be to run these groups full-time. It’s just incredible. It’s such a privilege to work with the kids, and the kids just love it, and they change and heal and grow so much. They leave with their eyes sparkly and they’re 10-foot tall.” It was brilliant.*

“That’s quite removed from the lack of engagement you’d originally been concerned about,” I suggested.

Yeah! Not even realising that I had an answer to what I was asking for.

After being back in her job at Smithton for 5 or 6 months, Nairn had *applied for a job at Brooks High School, Launceston, managing [Birribi] the off-campus program for kids at risk. [Later, I found out that] I got the job at Brooks because I was a demonstrated risk-taker, and they wanted someone who thought outside the box.*

This probably sounds bizarre now, but I actually did not see a place for the support groups, probably because of the way the job had been couched. And I didn’t see them as a core part of my role, ’cos then they were relatively new. So, I saw them as this brand new, very exciting thing, but it wasn’t at all part of how I defined my role, or what I did. And so it wasn’t even part of my thinking in terms of what teachers do.

“You didn’t think that the groups would fit with your new role?”

No! Well, it was all hands-on stuff, and I thought maybe I’d be able to do one or two [support] groups, but I saw it to be a far more practical-type role. It’s bizarre to me now, because that’s what my job ended up being, 110%. But it didn’t become apparent until I had a lot of discussions with

on” (Office for Educational Review, 1998, p. 1). The MARSSS program funding has since been extended (Department of Education, 2007).

the special ed coordinator. We talked, and I said, "I wouldn't mind running one of these groups." And the more we talked the more it was obvious [that it would be appropriate to run support groups as part of the off-campus program].

So, no wonder it's weird for a lot of teachers that come along. 'Cos I forget about it, now it's so much a part of who I am and how I operate. Wow!

It was obvious that Nairn was surprised when, as a direct result of our discussion, she realised how much her thinking had changed since those early days. "You've grown with it, and haven't questioned it," I noted.

Yes! That's really weird! Oh, Tammy! Ooh!! That's such an insight! Oh, I love it!

Our conversation returned to Nairn's position at Brooks High School. *When I looked at how I was gonna compose my day, I did not see a role for the [support] groups. And I thought it would be really nice to do one or two because I so loved it, but I was so excited about the new challenge of taking on this role, and transforming it. Relations had broken down in the school between the main campus and the [Birribi] off-campus program, to the extent that my key brief was, "Fix it up or we have to close it down."*

So, I was really excited about that challenge. Didn't think anything about groups. So, when I went around in the first 2 weeks to Grade 7 and 8 to talk about the sort of stuff that happens in our lives, and have kids sign into [support] groups, and we got 230 kids, I was just like, "Oh, my God!" And so, by the time I'd put all those kids into groups, well, actually that was more groups than I could run!

Nairn co-opted her aides, the school social worker, and some community members to help her run the support groups into which students had self-referred. *So, it sort of grew from there. But I was full-time running groups. So, in June of 1998, that's when we had Cheryl come back again, and that's when we had the people that I'd been working with at Brooks trained. Cheryl came out twice in '98, and we did one training in the North [of Tasmania] and had one in Hobart.*

Then in '99 I went on the Behaviour Management Team [a special task-force within the Education Department]. That wasn't without a whole lot of angst – and I took a MASSIVE pay-cut – but it was just really the right thing to do.

"Why do you say that?"

More and more, in Term 3 particularly at Brooks, my role had involved going out to other schools and sharing what we were doing, plus we'd had people who'd come to the training and they'd say,

“This is brilliant, and this is exactly what our school needs, and our kids are desperate for this, but I don’t feel like I know how to explain what it is, so can you come and tell our staff?” So, with the Behaviour Management Team, my role was going to be just supporting schools to establish support groups.

In ’98 or ’99 I joined Rotary, Launceston West. And the guys at Rotary were really excited about what they were hearing about MESH, or about Student Assistance Program. They had sponsored a lady [to undertake the training], who had a really life-changing, healing experience. It literally turned her world on its head and helped her move forward [in her life]. Winston, a Rotarian, mentored me to develop a business plan. And I remember him saying, “Well, how long before we don’t have to get Cheryl out any more? Before you do this?” And I remember looking at him across the table and thinking, “Winston, you don’t understand.” Like, no-one had ever suggested that before, and it was obvious they were expecting this was a natural, sort of.

“Progression?” I suggested.

Yeah! And it had not even crossed my mind, and that was so far out of my reality. That was MUCH further out of my reality than asking Cheryl to come from America, because that was something like, “Oh, I hadn’t thought of that, but yeah, I’ll do it.” This was like, “You have got to be kidding. You have NO idea what you are saying. That is not ever going to happen. But how do I break it to you?” Like, “You poor darling! You poor misguided soul!”

“So, who was the misguided one?” I teased. As the Rotary members had expected, Nairn has progressed a long way since her initial introduction to the Student Assistance Program.

Oh! Far out! Ironical laughter erupted from us both.

Given this opportunity to reflect on her attendance at her first support group training workshop in Arizona, Nairn still found it difficult to articulate precisely what it was about the program that impressed her. *I just remember thinking, “There’s something in that. There’s something really good about that.” But I didn’t know what it was. In many ways, it was like I didn’t actually hear anything new, but the pieces got put together in a different way that all made sense. It was like everything got reconfigured.*

Nairn’s participation in the training changed her focus as a teacher, and has markedly altered the career path she had once imagined. The facilitation of support groups,

and the training of support group facilitators, has become part of Nairn's life's work.⁸



MESH Support Group Facilitator Training in Australia

In Australia, the MESH program was originally known as the Student Assistance Program. However, the term “student assistance” was confusingly similar to terms used to refer to the financial assistance of students in Australia. Consequently, since early 2003, the program has been called MESH⁹ Support Group Facilitator Training in this country.

People learn of MESH workshops in a number of ways. The program is advertised via the Tasmanian Department of Education e-mail networks, and on the Social Solutions Pty. Ltd. website,¹⁰ as professional development. The program also receives word-of-mouth recommendations¹¹ from past participants, and has been recommended to teacher education students at the University of Tasmania. At least two Tasmanian state schools – one primary school and one high school – have participated in whole-staff training. One Tasmanian independent school provided training to the counsellor, principal, senior management team, and school staff, over a period of approximately 3 years. Schools that provide MESH support groups for their students tend to enrol new key staff members in the training as a way of orienting them to the program already operating in their schools.

A fee is charged to attend the MESH PD workshop and that fee is usually paid by the participant's school or workplace. The MARSSS initiative has provided one means of funding high school staff training in the program. The Rotary District of Tasmania has also sponsored the training of some individual school staff members from within the state. Relatively few individuals pay their own registration fee.

Following enrolment to attend the MESH PD, participants are supplied with a timetable of events for the 3-day workshop (see Appendix C). Additionally, each participant receives a manual (Student Assistance Program Training Institute, n.d.)

⁸ Nairn Walker eventually resigned from the Department of Education, and is currently a Director of Social Solutions Pty. Ltd., a private service provider of education-related professional development programs, including MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops.

⁹ MESH is an acronym for mental, emotional, social and spiritual health.

¹⁰ Social Solutions Pty. Ltd. website URL is <http://www.socialsolutions.com.au>.

¹¹ Although word-of-mouth comments tend to focus on the emotionally-challenging aspects of the program, causing a number of people to be concerned about, or dissuaded from, enrolling.

upon arrival at the workshop.

The PD consists of a variety of session types: interactive information sessions, kinaesthetic activities, and support groups.

Interactive information sessions

Over the course of each 3-day MESH workshop, Nairn Walker provides a number of information sessions on a variety of topics, including factual and statistical information on a range of life and societal issues. She accompanies this information with relevant stories from her own experiences of working with students in schools, and in support groups. These sessions are interactive insofar as the workshop participants contribute stories of their own experiences; these contributions become more frequent as participants become increasingly familiar with the process and each other, and as the trust within the group develops.

The purposes of some sessions are functional in nature; they are used to explain the program and the process that participants will experience during the workshop. These sessions include: an overview of the MESH program and its history; the importance of support groups; the basics of group dynamics; the early phases of effective group functioning, and the role of the facilitator; group communication skills; and later, more complex phases of group interaction.

Other sessions address the challenges of dealing with life issues that are emotionally-laden, and suggestions are made for appropriate ways in which sensitive topics can be addressed by individuals and schools. These issues include: addictions and co-dependency; child abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual), neglect and shame; homosexuality; self-harm, youth suicide and death; loss, grief and the healing process; dysfunctional families and their impact on children. Other sessions cover enabling, intervention and recovery; and healthy families.

Finally, there are sessions that provide information about the implementation of a MESH program and other possible support measures in schools. These include: the formation of a school crisis plan; MESH program implementation strategies and action plan; and support group implementation.

Kinaesthetic activities

Kinaesthetic activities include participants in exploring the dimensions of a number

of issues.

The first of these activities occurs after the information session on addiction and co-dependence. Nairn first displays a comprehensive list of addictions, and workshop participants are each given a small slip of paper and asked to write on it two or three addictions that have impacted their lives. Once participants have done this, Nairn collects the papers, shuffles them, and reads from this comprehensive list. This activity precedes the first support group, and serves to indicate that “we live in a highly addictive and addicted society,” and that participants are not alone in being impacted by addiction.

Another activity involves “messages from the past” during which participants are asked to recall a family rule from their childhood (either implied or explicitly stated), that they found unhelpful. They write this message on one side of a slip of paper, and then, on the other side of the paper, they re-write the rule in a way that they believe would have been more helpful. Each participant then scrunches up and throws the paper around in a mock paper fight. After several throws, participants locate a paper and some are asked to volunteer to read to the group the unhelpful rule they found. Nairn asks the reader how it would have felt to have the particular rule imposed while growing up. The volunteer answers, and then is asked to read out what the writer considered to be a more helpful rule. This activity serves to give participants permission to challenge the relevance of some taken-for-granted rules they have lived by, and the opportunity to reject or re-script rules for themselves, their families or students.¹²

Support groups

On Day 1, there is a short “introductions and logistics” session, during which each group member has an opportunity to introduce her- or himself to others present, and to voice any concerns – about students or societal issues – that led her or him to enrol in the PD. A key goal of the MESH workshop is to train participants to facilitate support groups. This training is experiential, and there is an expectation that each participant will co-facilitate at least one support group session during the 3-day workshop. It is during this introductory session that group members nominate which

¹² Other group activities, such as the family sculpture and affirmations, are described in the biographical narrative accounts.

one or two groups they will co-facilitate.¹³

Eight support group sessions occur during the course of the 3-day workshop: two on Day 1, and three each on Days 2 and 3. The topics of these groups include: personal history; feelings; defences; family rules; control; feedback; forgiveness; and a final closing group.

Groups are highly structured and follow a prescribed format from the manual (Student Assistance Program Training Institute, n.d., pp. C53–C70). Each group session is led by two or more co-facilitators. Each group begins with the co-facilitators restating the Group Purposes and Guidelines (see Appendix D), including the confidentiality pledge. Next, each facilitator shares a story of a challenging life experience, and then invites other group members to do the same (as described in the *Prologue*, p. 1). This is followed by a small go-around/warm-up activity, then a group activity relevant to the session topic. Each group session provides a further opportunity for participants to share their stories. In earlier groups this is done through paired sharing, while later sessions involve storying experience to the whole group. Then, the facilitator asks one or more “process questions.” These questions are designed to help transition participants from what can be an emotional experience to a more reflective state of mind. Each group session ends with a closing affirmation – a positive statement of change, based on the specific topic of each group – during which group members stand and connect in a physical way (as decided by one of the facilitators), and say the Serenity Poem¹⁴ together.

For training purposes, a feedback session follows each group. During this session, Nairn invites each of the facilitators to self-critique and discuss their role in facilitating the group. She gives feedback to the co-facilitators, and invites other group members to contribute feedback. Following the feedback session, Nairn answers any questions raised by the facilitators or other group members about aspects of group facilitation, the group dynamics, as well as about the implementation of support groups in a school or other setting.

The next section of this chapter provides an account of Student Assistance Programs and their influence, as they are described and studied within the extant literature.

¹³ The first and last group sessions (of the eight groups) are facilitated by Nairn, although when I am present at the training I co-facilitate these two group sessions with her.

¹⁴ Based on the Serenity Prayer, but without religious references: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”



Student Assistance Programs

Student Assistance Programs (SAPs) are described as the “dominant model for providing early intervention services in school settings to adolescents with substance abuse and related problems” (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2001, p. 1). Cheryl Watkins defines a SAP as:

a comprehensive primary prevention and early intervention program for students in elementary through postsecondary grades. The [student assistance] program includes a systematic effort to educate, identify, assess, refer, and support students with drug abuse problems and other high-risk behaviors which are interfering with a student’s education and life development. (Student Assistance Program Training Institute, n.d., p. A2)

In some locales within the US (Anderson, 1989; Carlson, Hughes, LaChapelle, Holayter, & Deebach, 1994; Gallagher & Satter, 1998), and Australia, however, the role of SAPs has expanded to cater to the needs of students for whom a range of issues in their personal, social or academic lives interferes with their education and/or life development. These issues include parental alcohol and other drug use, addiction or dependence, as well as family and relationship issues, such as parental separation and divorce, and blended families. Additionally, topics such as sexuality and pregnancy, physical or sexual abuse, depression and suicide, death, loss and grief are considered within the scope of the program, as these issues all have the potential to negatively affect students’ well-being. One assumption of SAPs is that individuals, families and communities can change for the better.¹⁵ That said, however, it is understood that “the arena of change is ultimately the individual” (Anderson, 1989, p. 4).

There are three different models of the program:

1. The one which is the subject of this study – a comprehensive SAP model, designed by Cheryl Watkins. This program is coordinated by school-based teachers, counsellors and internal staff. This program is school-owned, and partners with community agencies.
2. A core team model, which is a strong identification and referral model, with staff training and referrals to treatment and other community resources.

3. A community-based model, driven by community agencies or a community professional, which facilitates the program from the outside (Cheryl Watkins, personal communication, September 17, 2007).

Support Group Facilitator Training workshops are an integral component of SAPs. These workshops provide professional development to a core team of people – school staff, other professionals, and community volunteers – enabling them to work effectively in schools within the supportive environment provided by SAPs.

SAPs originated in the US during the 1970s and '80s. At least two different, but related, origins have been proposed for these programs. Cheryl Watkins says that SAPs “grew out of the recovery movement,” which began with the success of Alcoholics Anonymous (Cheryl Watkins, personal communication, September 17, 2007). Other SAPs are based on Employee Assistance Programs (Moore & Forster, 1993; Rainey, Hensley, & Crutchfield, 1997).

Adoption and spread of SAPs

Student Assistance Programs were widely adopted throughout the US in response to a number of factors (Anderson, 1989; Carlson et al., 1994). One factor was the need to address “alarming increases” in adolescent student use of alcohol and other drugs reported in survey data during the early 1970s (Anderson, 1989, p. xv; see also Carlson et al., 1994). Another factor was the “repeated disillusionment” which resulted when preventive measures introduced to combat the acknowledged “drug problem” failed to prove effective (Anderson, 1989, p. xv). The “most important factor” in the adoption of SAPs “was the increasing momentum of Employee Assistance Programs,” which had been demonstrated at the time to be “the most successful means of reaching adults with alcohol and other drug problems” (p. xv). In summary, “the need, the disaffection with prevention, and the availability of a viable model simply created the appropriate conditions for conception [of SAPs] all around the country” (p. xvii).

Additional to these conditions, legislation in a number of the United States was responsible for the creation of several provisions designed to address issues associated with adolescent student alcohol and other drug use (Anderson, 1989;

¹⁵ The philosophy underpinning SAPs seems to be largely derived from the work of Carl Rogers (see, for example, Rogers, n.d., 1956, 1962, 1967, 1969, 1971a, 1971b; C. R. Rogers, 1995), who put forward the idea that the self as an organism is capable of intrinsic strength and positive purpose.

Watkins, 1986). This legislation provided a “major psychosocial impact” as it gave “public permission to school districts and their communities to admit ‘having a drug problem,’ which is the first step in working toward its resolution” (Anderson, 1989, p. xvii). Funding for programs which addressed this issue was provided under this legislation, and this funding enabled the provision of SAPs within schools, and school districts (Anderson, 1989; Watkins, 1986).

It is known that “schools are among the most important social institutions for adolescents, second only to families in significance” (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2001, p. 3). Consequently, school staff members are well-placed to address the needs of students (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2001). Indeed, teachers have consistent access to children and adolescents, and are, by virtue of their career choice, usually concerned about the education, health, well-being and life chances of the young people in their care. Teachers, then, “are in a unique position to effect children’s interaction and behaviors and to model community standards” (Freidman & Beschner, 1985, Perry, 1986, as cited in Carlson et al., 1994, p. 3).

Beyond the factors already discussed, it has been suggested a further factor in the spread of SAPs has been the success of the program in addressing the needs of students (Anderson, 1989). However, it should be noted that evidence of positive outcomes in the literature appears to be largely anecdotal and often contradictory. Indeed, some writers report that the program is no more or less successful than some other early intervention strategies (Carlson et al., 1994).

Students “at risk”

Primarily, SAPs exist to identify, refer and support students “at risk.” Students considered to be “at risk,” however, are defined by different authors in different ways, whilst some researchers fail to define their use.

Wassef and colleagues have classified as at risk those students who are “exposed to psychosocial stressors which predispose them to emotional distress (e.g., physical abuse) and those whose behavior may place them at jeopardy (e.g., using drugs)” (1995, p. 525). Sagor and Cox consider “any child who is unlikely to graduate, on schedule, with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and inter/intra personal

relationships” to be at risk (2004, p. 1, adapted from Pearl, 1972). They believe that this definition encompasses the issues most people regard as essential for a life to be considered fulfilling. Yet, while this may be the dominant societal view of what constitutes “the good life,” some people value an alternate lifestyle, where this prevailing notion of at risk holds less (or, perhaps, no) relevance. This alternate view was depicted by Barone (2000b) in his classic story of his encounter with Billy Charles Barnett, a student labelled as being at risk. His conversation with Billy Charles caused Barone “to dramatically rethink the whole notion of what puts students at risk” (p. 181). Barone’s telling of Billy Charles’s story is a salutary reminder that the judgement of risk is often subjective, stereotypical, and commonly based on very little understanding of an individual student’s life circumstances, motivations or real-world prospects (2000b; see also Donmoyer & Kos, 1993).

Yet, students considered to be at risk, however they are defined, continue to be considered amongst the most challenging – both educationally and behaviourally – in the classrooms of contemporary teachers (Sagor & Cox, 2004). Another population, not always so easily identified, but who are equally at risk, are those students described as “defeated and discouraged learners” (pp. 1–2). It is, perhaps, relatively easy to typecast students who are at risk as “a problem” within schools, and, therefore, to see them as being in need of “fixing.” Yet, there are no easy “fixes” for some issues, such as the “terrible consequences of poverty, abuse, physical handicaps, and personal or family chemical dependency,” which impact students’ lives (Sagor & Cox, 2004, p. 2).

For teachers, creating a curriculum that can engage these diverse learners is one of the real challenges of their professional work. However, those teachers who are prepared to meet that challenge, by providing a curriculum that is relevant to students’ life worlds, can draw on students’ strengths and abilities, empower them, and give them a reason to come to school. At the same time, it is possible to improve students’ scores on standardised tests (see, for example, Schultz, 2006).

Beyond the taught curriculum, however, teachers’ attitudes are important, for they have the potential to influence not only their students’ educational engagement and attainment, but also their self-esteem, self-efficacy, social behaviours and their attitudes to school (Borich, 1999; Chang, 2003). The attitudes of teachers – their acceptance of and caring for these students, as well as the ways in which they tolerate

and act to deal appropriately with student behaviour – can, therefore, make a positive difference to their students’ education and lives (Borich, 1999; Chang, 2003; Rosiek, 1994).

Evaluation of SAPs

Evaluation to assess the effectiveness of SAPs is considered an integral component of the program (Student Assistance Program Training Institute, n.d., p. A124). However, there are very few evaluation studies of SAPs which have been published in the academic literature¹⁶ (Carlson et al., 1994, p. 5; Milgram, 1989, p. 328; Moore & Forster, 1993, p. 328; Rainey et al., 1997; Scott, Surface, Friedl, & Barlow, 1999, p. 168; Stevens, 1999), with most research on SAPs being primarily descriptive in nature (Einspruch & Deck, 1999; Rainey et al., 1997; Stevens, 1999). This “literature is dominated by papers and manuals giving information on program design, implementation, and operation” (Carlson et al., 1994, p. 5; see also Einspruch & Deck, 1999), rather than being evaluative in any rigorous way. Compounding this issue, many studies reported in the literature fail to identify which of the three different models of SAP has been the object of study. This makes direct comparison between the reported outcomes of studies difficult and unreliable.

Those research studies that have reported on the student outcomes of SAPs have been conducted in a number of US states. Generally, studies have relied upon surveys of students, including students’ pre- and post-SAP self-reports (Stevens, 1999); confidential follow-up surveys with students (Carlson et al., 1994, p. 9); and self-concept scale test results (Stevens, 1999). Another way to assess the effectiveness of SAPs has been to access school records, including: students’ records of attendance (Fertman, Tarasevich, & Hepler, 2003; Stevens, 1999); students’ tardy records (Stevens, 1999); records of students’ serious behavioural infringements (as assessed by suspension records) (Fertman et al., 2003); students’ academic performance, for example GPA (Stevens, 1999); and students’ promotion, retention and graduation status (Fertman et al., 2003).

¹⁶ Most studies that have been reported are published in journals relating to adolescence, counselling, or drug and alcohol addiction. However, there is a dedicated Student Assistance Journal [SAJ] which “disseminates information about student assistance programs to student assistance professionals, counselors, educators, treatment personnel and others who work with youths. [The journal] covers [issues such as the] planning, development, and administration of programs.” SAJ does not appear to be refereed, and attempts to contact the editor failed.

Although the support group component of SAPs is considered both popular and integral to the program, Einspruch and Deck reported in 1999 that there was “essentially no published literature studying [SAP] support groups”¹⁷ (Einspruch & Deck, 1999, p. E4).

Student outcomes

Student outcomes reported in the literature have been associated with changes to alcohol and other drug use, academic performance, and associated indicators, such as behaviour and relationships.

There have been reports of positive outcomes related to students’ alcohol and other drug use. In a large post-hoc comparative study (Scott et al., 1999), for example, schools with a SAP reported alcohol use that was statistically significantly lower than in comparable schools without a SAP.¹⁸ Other studies showed that students’ awareness of the problems associated with the consumption of alcohol and other drugs increased within schools where a SAP was in place (Wassef et al., 1998), and SAPs were found to be effective for those students who were impacted by the use of others (Carlson et al., 1994). There were also reports of increased abstinence (Carlson et al., 1994), reductions in alcohol and other drug use (Carlson et al., 1994; Milgram, 1998; Wassef et al., 1998), and cessation of use (Wassef et al., 1998). In the study by Carlson and colleagues (1994), students’ self-reports were largely supported by those of intervention specialists. Significantly, the study found that those users judged as drug-dependent on intake were among those most likely to have reduced their use.

Various indicators of academic performance have also been used to evaluate the effectiveness of SAPs, including improved grades, “increased involvement in school activities,” “reduced dropout rate” (Milgram, 1998, p. 113), and overall improvement (Carlson et al., 1994). In one large, comparative study, average academic achievement of students in SAP schools was statistically significantly higher than those from non-SAP schools (Scott et al., 1999). School attendance was shown to have improved in one study (Milgram, 1998), but remained unchanged for most students in another (Carlson et al., 1994). In fact, Carlson and colleagues reported that on measures of students’ “academic performance, their school behavior, or their attendance, ...

¹⁷ However, one of a suite of studies by Wassef and colleagues on SAPs and related programs does report SAP support group outcomes (1998).

those who did change were about equally likely to become worse in these areas as to improve” (p. 10).

Outcomes of SAPs which relate to school climate and student behaviour have also been reported, with varied results. SAPs have been linked to students’ improved overall quality of life and well-being (Carlson et al., 1994), and resulted in reports of improvements in school climate (Milgram, 1998) and school functioning (Carlson et al., 1994). Milgram concluded that SAPs “positively impact on the school and the community” (p. 115). However, while Milgram reported “reduced classroom disruption” (p. 113), Carlson and colleagues (1994) found that, for most students, school behaviour remained unchanged.

The literature has shown, however, that SAPs do increase the likelihood that students who need early intervention will be identified, and that identified students receive support they may not otherwise have received (Carlson et al., 1994; Milgram, 1998). Students who attended school-based support groups were almost unanimously supportive of the positive effects they derived from participation (Carlson et al., 1994; Rainey et al., 1997). These groups were believed by students “to be informative, interesting, and helpful in coping with problems” (Rainey et al., 1997, p. 38). Where a formal assessment was made of support group efficacy, no student indicated a negative response, and three-quarters of students believed that group participation assisted them in finding improved ways to deal with issues in their lives (Wassef et al., 1998). Indications of the popularity of the in-school support groups were that “nearly nine out of ten [students] stated that they would recommend the school group to a friend, two-thirds asked a friend to join, and a third referred a friend directly to the counselor for evaluation” (Wassef et al., 1998, p. 93). It would appear that SAPs “play a significant role in helping students who are experiencing problems” (Milgram, 1998, p. 115), and SAP support groups are a cost-effective way to “alleviate adolescents’ emotional distress and behavioral problems” especially as they reached those “students who might otherwise not receive help” (Wassef et al., 1998, p. 96).

As a result of participation in SAPs, students also reported having improved self-concept and self-acceptance (Stevens, 1999); improved interpersonal relationships with parents/guardians and classmates/peers (Milgram, 1998; Stevens, 1999), as well

¹⁸ However, the authors of that study caution against assuming a direct causal link between SAP

as with their teachers and guidance counsellors (Stevens, 1999). Importantly, “findings showed that students felt more accepted by teachers and felt more able to share concerns with teachers after their participation in the SAP” (Stevens, 1999, p. iii). Stevens believes that as a result of “establishing a solid rapport and trust, students seem to develop a friendship and bond with teachers that might not exist without a SAP” (p. 53).

While reports of academic indicators of the success of SAPs are inconsistent, it would appear that student perceptions of the value of the program are overwhelmingly positive. This view is supported by teachers, counsellors and others working in schools where SAPs exist. In such schools, reports indicate enhanced intrapersonal, interpersonal and school/community outcomes.

And teachers’ voices?

It is evident from the published reports that teachers are involved in both implementing SAPs and assessing the student outcomes thereof. These are valuable roles, and teachers are believed to be effective in their observations, identification, and documentation of students’ problem behaviours and in discussing problem behaviour with students (Milgram, 1998). Indeed, due to their interactions in support groups, students learn to trust their teachers and grant them privileged access to the intimate details of their life circumstances (1998); circumstances they would be hard-pressed to discover in any other way. Consequently, teachers who facilitate SAP support groups in schools are deeply involved in the lives of their students (T. C. Harrison, 1992).

And yet, despite the nature and extent of their participation in SAPs, most of the literature reports “around” the issue of teacher involvement. It becomes abundantly clear in reviewing the relevant literature that the voices of teachers themselves are absent. Researchers appear to have avoided asking teachers about their experiences of training, implementing or assessing SAPs.

Additionally, there appear to be no published studies which have investigated teachers’ experiences of their participation in SAP/MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops, or on the outcomes for teachers (or any other professionals) of such participation. Accordingly, this study set out to investigate this “gap” in the

presence and these reported outcomes, as the study did not take into account other variables.

literature – the outcomes for teachers of their participation in a SAP/MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshop.

Chapter 3 - Literature review

Situating the experience: Exploring the paths marked out by others

*The possession of knowledge does not kill the sense of wonder and mystery.
There is always more mystery.¹*

Very early in my study, as I began to engage with the literature as a way of locating my research within that of the broader academic community, I chanced upon a writer whose thoughts have stayed with me and have resonated with my own. For me, “hearing” Arthur Jersild’s “voice” (1954, 1955), amongst the many voices of those who speak and write about teachers and teaching, was a transformative experience.

Jersild understood that all teaching is relational; that there is a crucial connection between teachers’ self-understanding and the potential affective outcomes for their students. He believed that:

the teacher’s understanding and acceptance of [herself or] himself is the most important requirement in any effort [she or] he makes to help students to know themselves and to gain healthy attitudes of self-acceptance. (1955, p. 3)

Over half a century later, Jersild’s words appear prophetic in the context of this study.



This chapter provides the reader with an orientation to issues that are central to this dissertation. The first section of this chapter explores the factors that influence the work of teachers, and the ever-changing social conditions within which this work takes place. It examines, too, the nature of the “social work” role that teachers often perform.

The next section explores the personal, relational and emotional nature of teachers’

¹ Anaïs Nin.

work, the crucial influence that teachers-as-people have on their students, and argues the need for teachers to develop self-awareness. This section also raises the possibility of accepting personal development as teacher professional development.

The final section engages the reader in the literature related to the narrative construction of self. In this section I investigate literature on the importance of storytelling to self-construction, the impact of critical incidents on the self, and how these incidents need to be incorporated into our self-stories. The benefits of raising stories to consciousness and interrogating them, as well as the difficulties involved in sharing “secret stories,” and the role of storylistening in the development of empathy are also explored.

Exploration of this literature provides the relevant theoretical lens through which the central research question of this study may be examined: *What are the enduring outcomes for teachers of their participation in a 3-day MESH professional development workshop?*



Teachers' work

The metaphorical descriptors of teachers' work are many and include references to teachers as: professionals, researchers, bricoleurs (or tinkerers), intellectuals, reflective practitioners, technicians, political actors, artisans/craftspersons, evaluators, executives, collaborators, workers and scholars (John Smyth, 1998). It is no wonder, then, that teachers' work has been described as highly complex (Day, 2000; Hamachek, 1999; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Senate Employment, 1998), demanding (Forrester, 2005; Hamachek, 1999; Nieto, 2003; Senate Employment, 1998), and challenging (Fischman, DiBara, & Gardner, 2006; Forrester, 2005). While teaching is an activity which is relational and interpersonal (Day, 2000; Hamachek, 1999), it is also understood as work that is individualistic (Nias, 1989a), isolating (Lortie, 1975), often anxious, and lonely (Bullough, Bullough, & Mayes, 2006; Jersild, 1955; Nias, 1989a). Additionally, schools, the cultural milieus of teachers' work, are known to be “complex” and “rapidly evolving” workplaces (Biddle, Good, & Goodson, 1997, p. 1; see also Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998).

Given such descriptors, and the fact that “teachers constitute by far the largest

population of professionals² in industrialized nations” (Biddle et al., 1997, p. 1; see also Marginson, 1993), it is unsurprising that many aspects of teachers’ work, lives and careers have been the focus of the work of numerous educational researchers and writers. Notable, amongst the published studies of teachers and their lives, are Wolcott’s study of a school principal’s working life (1973), Lortie’s sociological study of school teachers (1975), Ball and Goodson’s edited collection on teachers’ lives and careers (1985), Connell’s study of Australian secondary teachers’ work (1985), Sikes, Measor and Woods’ study of English secondary school teachers’ career life-cycles (1985), the study by Nias of (for the most part) primary teaching as work (1989a), Goodson’s edited collection of studies of teachers’ lives (1992b), and Huberman’s study of Swiss secondary school teachers’ working lives (1993).

The fact that so much has been written about teachers’ work may have prompted Biddle, Good and Goodson to challenge later writers by pondering: “What can one possibly learn that is new about teachers and teaching?” (1997, p. 1).

Primarily, teachers are educated and employed to develop the academic learning skills, and facilitate the academic learning, of their students (Barry & King, 1998; Fischman et al., 2006). Beyond this initial, and ostensibly simple, description of their role, teachers are expected “to nurture students and to manage information in such a way that each student achieves maximum intellectual, social, physical, [cultural, moral, aesthetic,] emotional and spiritual growth” (Barry & King, 1998, p. 6; see also The Adelaide Declaration of National Goals, as cited in Aspin, Chapman, & Klenowski, 2001; Day, 2000). They are, furthermore, expected to prepare students for “the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life” (Day, 2000, p. 103). Teachers’ work is more than this, however, because it involves a search for meaning (Apps, 1996; Jersild, 1955); a search that is as “ancient” as it is “distinctly personal,” taking place both internally, within the self of the teacher, and externally, in the world she or he inhabits (Jersild, 1955, pp. 4–5).

Teachers of Jersild’s time were disillusioned by “the emptiness of much of what is done in the name of learning” (p. 7), an issue that continues to concern teachers in contemporary schools (Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1995; Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999a).

² Although there is some debate about whether teaching is actually a profession, due, for example, to the lack of autonomy and control teachers have in comparison with other professions (see, for example, Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Day & Sachs, 2004a; Englund, 1996; Labaree, 1992; Lofty, 2003; Phelps, 2003; Sachs, 1997).

For many educators, teaching is far more than just a job. Certainly, many teachers consider their work to be a “calling” (Casbon, Shagoury, Smith, & Carpenter, 2005, p. 359), and they are prepared to go “above and beyond the call of duty,” because they are deeply and personally committed to their students’ holistic well-being and development (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 383).

Although the language to express teachers’ views on education may have changed in the past 50 years, it would appear that concerns that educational “undertakings are often rather empty,” and that “much of what goes on [in schools] consists of scholarly motions, lacking the vital spark of personal concern” (Jersild, 1955, p. 4), remain with us today (Hargreaves, 1995; Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999a). Since Jersild’s message was first published, it appears that little has changed for teachers, or for schooling in this regard.

There have been other changes though, because education is continually subjected to the effects of educational and societal change.

Educational change

Within the sphere of formal education systems, change has been recognised as being so constant that it might well be accepted as “the norm, the stable state” (Sikes, 1992, p. 36; see also Boy & Pine, 1971; Churchill, Williamson, & Grady, 1997; Helsby, 1999; Huberman, 1993). However, the frequency and intensity of change to the nature of teachers’ work over the past half a century appear to be unprecedented (Day, 2000; C. Gardner & Williamson, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Sikes, 1992), in that “hardly a year has passed without some reform being mooted, negotiated or imposed” (Day, 2000, p. 101). Indeed, many teachers have been “overwhelmed” by constant, multiple changes (Day & Bakioğlu, 1996, p. 217).

Essentially, teachers’ work is both “politically and socially constructed” (Goodson, 1997, p. 137). Role definitions are “rarely articulated” (Danforth & Smith, 2005, p. 268; see also Akin, 2002), and this has meant that “what teachers do is open constantly to political and educational redefinition” (Reid, 1993, p. 126; see also Helsby, 1999). As a consequence, it is unsurprising that many contemporary teachers focus largely on survival, rather than furthering their own development as professionals (Day, 2000).

This constant process of change, in which there is never-ending redefinition of the

teacher's role, has been attributed to a crude and simplistic "political and 'managerial'" view of schooling (Goodson, 1992d, p. 235; see also Helsby, 1999). Indeed, "educators often find that they must cope with policy proposals for 'improving' schools that are based on absurd assumptions and profound misunderstandings about teachers and teaching" (Biddle et al., 1997, p. 1). There is a perception that these school improvement-related decisions are made by stakeholders who have "ignored fairness and common sense, and [are] distant from day-to-day realities" of the classroom, or those keen to advance their own careers (Churchill et al., 1997, pp. 153–154). How well or poorly teachers cope with imposed changes varies from teacher to teacher (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008), and is largely dependent upon the type of change imposed (Churchill et al., 1997), the culture of the workplace (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008), and the extent to which an individual's experience is affected (Fischman et al., 2006).

Thus, while some changes are experienced positively and provide teachers with opportunities for flexibility and autonomy in the ways in which their roles are redefined (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Fischman et al., 2006), other changes are more difficult for teachers (Sikes, 1992). More often, however, it appears that "the demands of teaching call forth contrary acts that bruise the teacher's soul; teaching contrary to beliefs and commitments and suffering as a result" (Bullough et al., 2006, p. 194). While some teachers appear to accept, uncritically, that change will benefit students (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008), other teachers suffer in the knowledge that, apart from making their own work more demanding, all too frequently the changes that are imposed do little or nothing to improve schools or schooling (Churchill et al., 1997; Helsby, 1999).

Teachers are currently experiencing a variety of changes in educational policy, including the *intensification* of their role and the duties expected of them, the scope of the measures that have been implemented to improve their *accountability* to the system, and changes to the number and ability of their *student cohort*. These three issues are discussed in more detail below.

Intensification

There is overwhelming anecdotal and research evidence that contemporary teachers work longer hours (C. Gardner & Williamson, 2006), and fulfil a much wider role with an ever-expanding range of associated duties (Apple, 1986; Ballet et al., 2006;

Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Churchill et al., 1997; Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994; Meister, 2000b; Reid, 1993; John Smyth, 1995).

Despite a public perception, frequently supported by sensationalist media reports, that teaching is a “nine ’til three” occupation (Howe, 2005), teachers commonly do work much longer hours than is generally acknowledged. For example, about 30% of Australian teachers report working between 40 and 49 hours, and about 20% of teachers over 50 hours (ABS, 2003, as cited in C. Gardner & Williamson, 2006). Much of this “overtime” work is performed early in the morning and late into the night, thus encroaching on what might otherwise have been considered family time (2006). Consequently, far from being the “family friendly” career that many believe it is, teaching can exact a considerable toll on teachers and their families (Churchill et al., 1997; C. Gardner & Williamson, 2006).

The range of duties that teachers are expected to perform include: the monitoring, assessing and reporting of student progress and outcomes to both parents or guardians, as well as separate accounting and reporting to the school system; the implementation of appropriate behaviour management strategies, and the disciplining of students; socialising students, and teaching societal values and norms; administrative duties, which include attending staff meetings; break-time playground and before- and after-school bus duties; extra-curricula activities, such as coaching sports teams, student performances, and excursions; participating in professional learning opportunities (see for example, Biddle et al., 1997; C. Gardner & Williamson, 2006; Ingersoll, 2003; Reid, 1993); and counselling students (Reid, 1993; B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). A number of these activities may be considered “distractions from the core activity of teaching” (Ballet et al., 2006, p. 209; see also C. Gardner & Williamson, 2006; Senate Employment, 1998), despite them being justifiable on the grounds that they improve the management, experience, quality or safety of students and/or their education (see, for example Ballet et al., 2006; Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008).

However, despite these ever-broadening expectations of teachers,³ and requirements for teachers to increase their commitment to their students’ holistic education, development and well-being, the role of teachers and the purpose of education are

³ Not all intensification to the nature of teachers’ work is from external sources, however, as teachers also “impose on themselves standards of pedagogical perfection, and strive for them with fierce determination” (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008, p. 63).

still often defined quite narrowly within the broader society (Apps, 1996; Eisner, 2004; Fischman et al., 2006; H. Gardner, 1991).

Accountability

Over the past half a century, accountability has become an issue of primary concern for school systems, because educational institutions and those who work in them are now held accountable for the educational success of their students (Eisner, 2004; Hargreaves, 1997b; Ingersoll, 2003; Macpherson, 1994; Sachs, 1997; John Smyth, 1995). Students' scores on standardised tests and national benchmarks, the rates at which students are retained in schools until graduation, and the university entrance scores that they attain, are used by politicians and the media to judge whether education is successful (Fischman et al., 2006).

Indeed, Abbs believes that "in our schools and universities we have become pathologically obsessed with quantitative measurement rather than the qualitative flow of meaning, with a brute collective standardization rather than the more subtle modes of individuation" (2003, p. 2; see also H. Gardner, 1991; Kelchtermans, 2005). Increasingly, teachers are finding that their work is judged almost exclusively by student tests and examination performance outcomes (Forrester, 2005; Ingersoll, 2003). Not only are these quantitative measures of political interest at a local and national level, but there is, increasingly, competitive pressure at an international level, with educational rankings being undertaken by the OECD on a range of indicators (Marginson, 1993).

Despite the number and variety of stakeholders to whom teachers consider themselves responsible, most often it is their commitment to their students that takes precedence (Fischman et al., 2006). Many teachers find that the current emphasis on academic performance and measurement of results is counterproductive to the way they perceive their work as teachers. Policy that essentially results in "teaching to the test" instead of teaching for student engagement and learning runs counter to the philosophical basis of teachers' professionalism (Abrams & Madaus, 2003, as cited in Kottler, Zehm, & Kottler, 2005). The current focus, then, tends to devalue the importance of the work teachers do (Forrester, 2005), and it neglects the fact that most teachers regard the "development of *both* the academic and personal skills" of their students to be their "primary responsibility" (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 387). In their teaching practice, teachers are aware that "work on academic skills cannot

always be easily separated from work on students' social and personal skills" (p. 387). Successful teaching involves far more than quantitative measures of achievement, and success is recognised by teachers in other ways, for example, "when students 'give back,' in improved behaviors, attitudes and accomplishments" (p. 387).

Significantly, current politically-motivated measures of teacher effectiveness often neglect the degree of care teachers feel for their students (Forrester, 2005). This caring by teachers includes the "hope that they will have a positive impact on the students' lives;" many teachers cannot help but "worry about those students they fail to reach" (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 387).

Student cohort

Another noteworthy change for teachers has been the diversity of the student cohort they are expected to teach, and with whom they are expected to achieve acceptable academic results. During the last 30 years, significant changes have taken place across the world in the provision of education to children with special needs – those children with "intellectual, physical or sensory disabilities, behavioural problems, or learning difficulties" (Foreman, 2001, p. 13). This change was implemented following the recognition that government systems have failed to provide a proper and equitable education for these children in the past (Ashman & Elkins, 1998; Evans, 1995; Foreman, 2001). As a result, the goal of many education systems has been to achieve the education of these children in the least restrictive educational environment (Ashman & Elkins, 1998; Evans, 1995; Foreman, 2001). School systems across Australia have followed this international trend and now actively promote the education of all students, although not necessarily in a fully integrated school system (Evans, 1995; Foreman, 2001).

The effect of inclusion policies is that "classrooms are becoming more heterogeneous" (Talmor, Reiter, & Feigin, 2005, p. 215). Children considered to have a disabling or handicapping condition make up between 2.5% and 3% of school-aged children in Australia, with another 14% or 15% of students requiring some additional support related to either learning or behaviour problems (Ashman & Elkins, 1998). This increase in student diversity requires some modification of the curriculum and its objectives in order to meet the needs of individual students. Additionally, the classroom teacher may be required to spend considerably more time in meetings with senior members of school staff, specialists (for example, physiotherapists and speech

pathologists) and the child's parents than had previously been the case. Teachers are also expected to formulate Individual Education Plans (Department of Education, 2006), and evaluate the agreed learning outcomes for each student. Depending on their categorised level of need, some students attract funding which enables them to have an aide assigned to work with them for part or all of the school day (2006). Such ancillary support also creates some additional work for teachers because they are required to plan for and work with these aides (2006). Additionally, inclusion may be disruptive to regular class activities because students may be withdrawn in order to receive the specialised support that they need (Barry & King, 1998).

Regrettably, the incidence and intensity of emotional and behavioural disorders and aggressive violence among students in schools has been increasing (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003; Wilson, Cordry, Notar, & Friery, 2004). Approximately 5% of students are considered to be behaviourally disordered; students whose "disruptive and disordered behaviour is frequent, intense and generalised (not confined to the class they are enrolled in)" (B. Rogers, 1995, pp. 44, 149–150). Students who exhibit this kind of problematic behaviour are most likely to be the same students considered "at risk" of school failure (Sagor & Cox, 2004, p. 1). They are often "trying to make sense out of a variety of highly charged emotional stressors (e.g., poor reading skills, changing family structure, parental abuse and neglect) and will likely direct their hurt and frustration at teachers and peers" (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003, p. 11). Increasingly, teachers are finding such student behaviour difficult to manage, and it is no longer uncommon for students' aggressive behaviour to result in teachers being subjected to violent acts by their students. The disruptive behaviours of these students are considered to be extremely problematic, and are a matter of considerable concern to teachers (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003; Yuen & Westwood, 2001).

The inclusion of children with special needs in regular classes, then, raises a number of concerns for teachers, and may be professionally, and often personally, challenging (Foreman, 2001; Jóhannesson, 2006; B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003; Talmor et al., 2005). And while there are benefits that can accrue from inclusive classroom practices, such as increased social acceptance and understanding of individual differences, there is justifiable criticism that teachers "are under pressure to fill the gaps left by inadequate support of disabled children by other government departments" (Mathews submission 168, cited in Senate Employment, 1998, ¶ 4,

n.p.). The picture that emerges is that there are many dedicated teaching professionals in schools who feel unsupported by the school systems that employ them (Talmor et al., 2005; Woods, 1989).

Societal change

Increasingly, too, the breakdown of social cohesion in communities and the increasingly fluid structure of the post-modern family impacts upon the work (and personal) lives of teachers (Churchill et al., 1997; Day, 2000; Elkind, 1997; Jóhannesson, 2006). Specifically, the social values (Boy & Pine, 1971) and domestic circumstances of children coming into schools have changed (Day, 2000; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Jóhannesson, 2006), and many children are living, and attending school, with a variety of weighty social and emotional issues impacting upon their lives, and, ultimately, their learning (Goleman, 1995, as cited in Day & Leitch, 2001; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves, 2000; Heron, 1982; Lee, 2005).

Issues such as the breakdown of the family unit, parental unemployment, both legal and illicit substance use, abuse, and addiction, and mental health disorders, all take their toll on children's ability to engage with learning opportunities. While Bernard reports that half to two-thirds of children coming from such backgrounds have the resilience to overcome the circumstances of their early years (1995, as cited in Oswald, Johnson, & Howard, 2003), this leaves one-third to half of these children remaining at risk. As a result of this combination of factors, far too many students and teachers in classrooms are struggling (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998).

Family structure

In 1978, Margaret Mead suggested that the lack of extended family support to nuclear families meant that they were experiencing social isolation, and were, as a result, impossibly situated. Statistically, there is growing evidence to support her claim. In Australia, as in a number of other countries in the Western world, the structure of this current generation's family has evolved even further (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Day, 2000). As a consequence, "families with two parents and their own biological children" are no longer "the cultural norm" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 7). Indeed, the percentage of children who now come from homes where they live with only one of their biological parents is increasing, and in some societies is in the majority (Day, 2000).

In Australia, over the past 20 years, the percentage of one-parent families with children aged under 15 years of age has been rising (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Between the years 2004 and 2006, approximately 22% of all Australian families with children under the age of 15 years were one-parent families (increasing from 14% in 1986-1988), with one-fifth of all children now belonging to one-parent families, 87% of which were “headed by mothers” (n.p.).

The greatest proportion of children from one-parent families come from homes where a parental marriage has ended in divorce or separation (55% in 2003), although 5% of children in one-parent families have experienced the death of one parent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007).⁴ These figures are reported without the intention to infer that two-parent families are inherently better than one-parent families, but because statistically it has been shown to be disadvantageous to come from a one-parent family. Crockett and Tripp have reported that “children who experience family disruption [e.g., through death, divorce and familial separation] are more likely to suffer social, educational and health problems than a comparable sample whose families remain intact” (as cited in Day, 2000, p. 103; see also Wassef et al., 1995). Additionally, children from one-parent families “are considered to be at a higher risk of disadvantage, for example, in income, housing, employment and social participation” than those from other family types (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007, n.p.). Moreover, one-parent families are also more likely to experience the effects of poverty (Day, 2000; Wassef et al., 1995). Within Australia, 61% of one-parent families are supported principally by government pensions and allowances, and many of those in this situation report finding it difficult to meet their financial obligations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The additional stresses created by poverty are a serious social issue (Day, 2000) which impacts on teachers, as it does their students.

While “children of divorced families generally have higher levels of anxiety than their counterparts from intact two-parented homes” (Jasinski, 2003, p. iii), the evidence that the experience of parental “loss” (either through death or divorce) in childhood causes problems in adulthood is “somewhat fragile;” it appears that “family discord” is a more significant indicator of “long term impact” (Tennant, 1991, p. 314; see also

⁴ The remaining children from one-parent families were born to de facto couples who have since separated, or were born outside of marriage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). In England, Day has reported that in 2000, 31% of children were born outside of marriage (Day, 2000).

Amato, 2005). Elkind believes that “the traditional view of the family as a haven providing refuge and creating warmth and harmony has been exposed as a myth,” and that “the home” has become “one of the main sources of stress” (1994, as cited in Woods & Carlyle, 2002, p. 179). As a result of their unique position within the community, contemporary teachers need to be “somewhat aware of students’ family life in its ease and unease” (Greene, 1995, p. 11). Indeed, teachers and schools are potentially well-situated to provide the safety and stability that some students lack in their home lives (Nias, 1997).

Technology

The media, and the electronic age, are influencing students, too, and this has been identified as an issue affecting the nature of teachers’ work (Day, 2000). Despite the apparent outward sophistication of some students, particularly in regard to their abilities in relation to technology, many children spend long periods of time alone, and unsupervised, watching “considerable amounts of TV and video” (p. 103), of questionable value. In 1998, Hargreaves reported that many children from more economically-advantaged homes have bedrooms that have been described as “self-sustaining biospheres – each with its own computer, music centre, television and telephone,” enhancing independence and increasing isolation (p. 40). Recent British research reports that 80% of children aged between 5 and 16 years, have a television in their room, and that they spend, on average, 5 hours and 20 minutes in front of a (television or computer) screen each day (Childwise, as cited in Ward, 2008). Such children are prone to becoming so technology-dependent that they may lack communication and negotiation skills (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998), and are “more vulnerable, uncertain of their values and, paradoxically, may lack motivation, self-esteem and self-confidence in school-centred learning” (Day, 2000, p. 103). Simultaneous with the advances in technology, traditional personal and community values are being lost and schools are now expected to take on their transmission, when this was once the responsibility of the family (Day, 2000; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998).

Substance use and addiction

Addiction is a serious community health issue. Adults’ addictions of various kinds place severe strains on their own lives, on their familial relationships, and on children

in the families (Australian National Council on Drugs, 2007). A recent Australian report estimates that over 450,000 children under 12 years-of-age are exposed to binge drinking of alcohol by a parent or carer, nearly 80,000 children witness regular marijuana use in the home, and over 27,000 are exposed to regular parental or carer methamphetamine use (Australian National Council on Drugs, 2007).

“Tobacco is one of the most widely used legal drugs in Australia”⁵ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007a, p. 3). Smoking is hazardous to physical health, and there is a high correlation between smoking tobacco cigarettes and other behaviours which are problematic (McGovern & DuPont, 1991, as cited in Meister, 2000a).

In Australia, “alcohol is the most widely used psychoactive, or mood-changing, recreational drug”⁶ (ADF 2003, as cited in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007a, p. 12). Alcohol consumption is considered a cultural norm in Australia, with 41% of the population consuming alcohol on a weekly basis (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007a). Almost 1 in 10 Australians over 14 years-of-age report drinking at levels that put them at “long-term risk” and over a third are putting themselves at “short-term risk” (p. 14). This is a major cause for concern (Paton, 1999). Additionally, alcohol abuse by either parent, or a carer, affects children both pre- and post-natally, and “the adverse effects that parental alcohol use may have on children are numerous, pervasive, costly, and often enduring” (Weinberg, 1999, p. 315). Alcohol dependence is a disease that is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2007). It has four symptoms: craving, loss of control, physical dependence, and tolerance (2007). Alcoholism is able to be treated with varying degrees of success, however it cannot be cured (2007). Families in which parental or carer alcohol use is an issue more often experience psychosocial stressors, such as financial, health, environmental and emotional instability (Australian National Council on Drugs, 2007; Weinberg, 1999). Estimates suggest that four to six children in any class of 25

⁵ However, Australia’s incidence of daily smoking is one of the lowest in the OECD countries, behind Canada, Sweden and the United States of America (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007a, p. 10).

⁶ “Australia ranked 22nd highest in the world in terms of per capita consumption of alcohol, with approximately 7 litres equivalent of pure alcohol consumed per person” (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007a, p. 18).

students are children of alcoholics (Knight, Vail-Smith, & Barnes, 1992).⁷ There is little doubt that these children “represent a population at risk for alcoholism as well as other physical, emotional, and social problems” (p. 367). Like tobacco smoking, alcohol consumption is linked to other risky and anti-social behaviours (Australian National Council on Drugs, 2007; Paton, 1999). Alcohol, for example, is more frequently implicated in acts of violence than any other substance (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007a; Australian National Council on Drugs, 2007).

Illicit drugs, too, are a problem. There is a risk of high to very high levels of psychological distress associated with marijuana/cannabis use (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007a). Worryingly, in a recent survey, many users of illicit drugs reported concurrent use of a range of substances, most frequently mixing illicit drugs with alcohol (53%-68%), tobacco (41%-48%) or cannabis (over one-third) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007a).

Australia’s rates on these and a number of other indicators of social dysfunction are considered “disturbing” (Aspin et al., 2001, p. 137). Parental substance use and addiction are problematic for students as they have the potential to affect students’ capacity to positively engage with learning, their families, schools, and communities. The quality of school and community support is a factor in mediating the impact of parental abuse on children (Australian National Council on Drugs, 2007). However, it is clear that “school personnel are often overwhelmed with the substance abuse problems they do encounter” (Moore & Forster, 1993, p. 326).

Community mental health and well-being

Our post-modern culture brings with it a pervasive sense of “fragmentation, breakdown and loss of meaning ... and purpose” (Beare & Slaughter, 1993, p. 15, as cited in Day, 2000, pp. 105–106; see also Apps, 1996; Padnos, as cited in Eckersley, 2004). Consequently, it is unsurprising that contemporary Western society is full “of people who in the middle of great wealth are starving spiritually,” leading empty and inauthentic lives (Seligman, 2002, p. 8). Such community deficiencies have been linked to depression, self-harm and suicide, all of which impact upon adult and school communities.

⁷ While these are US figures, it is probable that the figures in Australia are comparable, based on alcohol consumption rates.

The reported incidence of depression in Australia has increased, and current estimates are that one in five Australians will suffer from depression at some time in their lives (Beyond Blue, 2006).

Suicide is another major concern for affected families and their communities, and while suicide rates within Australia have remained relatively stable since the 1920s, between 10 and 14 deaths per 100,000 people are generally attributed to suicide each year (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000).⁸ Yet, as older Australians are now less likely to commit suicide, the rate at which younger people die from suicide has increased dramatically. Of particular concern is the rate of suicide for “males aged 15 to 24 [which has] more than tripled over the past 40 years” (p. 10). In any given year, between 5 and 10 percent of young people report attempting suicide (Martin, 1995, & Zubrick, et al., 1995, 1997, as cited in Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000), and Tasmania has the highest rate of suicide of any Australian state, at 39% above the national average⁹ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). This phenomenon, however, is not new; this state has recorded suicide rates “above the national average for 22 of the past 25 years” (Stedman, 2004, p. 6).

Whereas, within Australia, young women are less likely to die of suicide than their male counterparts, the incidence of young women deliberately self-harming is increasing, with those most at risk between the ages of 15 and 19 years (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000).

An important protective factor against suicide and suicidal behaviours is young people’s feelings of connectedness to caring adults both within the family and in their schools and communities (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000). Good physical and mental health, and personal resilience, are other protective factors.

A recent large-scale study into the social and emotional well-being (SEWB) of Australian students (Bernard, Stephanou, & Urbach, 2007) has implications for teachers and schools. The study found that a significant proportion of students were experiencing a range of social and emotional difficulties, such as excessive worrying, nervousness, stress, hopelessness, depression, and anger. Unsurprisingly, students

⁸ Suicide rates in Australia are comparable with those in Canada, the US, and New Zealand (Canto, Neulinger & De Leo, 1999, as cited in Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000).

with low levels of SEWB were identified as facing multiple challenges, and were considered likely to experience more negative emotions and behaviours and fewer positive emotions and behaviours. These students exhibit “few social and emotional capabilities” and “perceive few positive actions of adults, peers and youth-oriented programs in their schools, homes and communities” (p. 6). These students do not believe that their teachers: care about them, try to help them, or believe they are capable of success. And, since students do “develop inferences about what teachers think of and expect of them” (Good & Brophy, 1997, p. 93), in some instances, at least, these students’ perceptions may be correct.

Another finding of particular relevance to teachers is that there are consistent differences between students’ self-views of their levels of SEWB and the teachers’ perceptions of students’ levels, meaning that “teachers may be unaware of the extent of the emotional difficulties of students (anxiety, stress, anger)” (Bernard et al., 2007, p. 6). According to this study, teachers do tend to perceive students who are from more financially-advantaged backgrounds as having significantly higher levels of SEWB than those from more financially-disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, Bernard and colleagues found that teachers who talk with students about emotions and feelings, teach about friendship and problem-solving, talk with students about their lives outside of school, and allow students a voice in class and school affairs do contribute positively to their students’ SEWB. Teachers’ attitudes and actions do make a difference to their students’ lives (Bernard et al., 2007).

The acquisition of factual information about health risks is not the solution to the issues already discussed herein, because people tend to act on how they feel, not on what they know. Indeed, students are generally aware of the risks associated with their risk-taking behaviours. Moreover, risky behaviour by adolescents is believed by some authorities to be “attempts to intervene against the nothingness,” fulfilling a profoundly human need “to transform the passive experience of suffering into something [they] can actively control” (Stone, as cited in Eckersley, 2004, p. 36). It is no exaggeration to suggest that, with the circumstances that young people and their communities are experiencing, schools are impossibly situated (Beare & Slaughter, 1993, as cited in Day, 2000). For many teachers, this means that they come into daily contact with students who are attempting to meet the unremitting challenges of

⁹ Although the Northern Territory rate is more than double the national average.

societal change. All too frequently, their teacher is the only support these students are likely to find.

Social work/welfare role

Increasingly, societal changes, such as those already outlined above, have impacted upon the teachers' role, so that the work that teachers perform now includes activities that are more commonly associated with social work or counselling (Day, 2000; M. Kelly, 2004; Nias, 1997; B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). "School teachers' welfare role threatens to engulf their primary function, that is, to teach" (Senate Employment, 1998, The time devoted to non core teaching tasks section, ¶ 1). Yet, teachers are not trained to be social workers (Best, 2002; Nias, 1997; Senate Employment, 1998; Webb & Vulliamy, 2002).¹⁰ Nevertheless, many teachers take on this non-traditional, social work role as part of their pastoral care responsibilities (Nias, 1997; see also Best, 2002). In effect, they are challenged by the "reality of school life" (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 166) to fill "the yawning gap between official constructions of their role on the one hand and their lived experience on the other" (Cunningham, 1999, as cited in Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 166; see also Senate Employment, 1998). For teachers, then, what is going on outside of schools in the wider society is "the biggest issue" affecting the work they perform within schools (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 386; see also Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves, 2003). However, so neglected is this issue in the literature that it has been suggested that "a conspiracy of silence" exists regarding the social work expectations placed on teachers (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 168).

Teachers are often ill-prepared by their teacher education courses to take on this social work role, and they often have trouble identifying student issues which are not intelligence-based (Meister, 2000a). Since many student issues arise from alcohol and other drug use and addiction, dysfunctional families, mental health problems, and physical, emotional or sexual abuse, they are usually difficult for teachers to recognise. Thus, students at risk, and the problems they face, often fail to be identified or acknowledged by their teachers (Knight et al., 1992, p. 367; Meister, 2000a; Paton, 1999; Skinner, 1999). Teachers' perceptions of which students may be

¹⁰ Although a UK survey by Lang and Hooper found "there was considerable interest in counseling skills training and most LEAs [Local Education Authorities] claimed to have been providing some such training to teachers and others involved in education" (1988, as cited in Best, 2002, p. 13).

at risk may be limited, too (Skinner, 1999). Furthermore, even if teachers do identify students who exhibit at risk behaviours, they often lack knowledge of the resources available and the procedures and protocols in place to assist these children (Meister, 2000a). Despite the fact that social workers and related professionals are available to schools, this availability is limited, and is all too frequently perceived as inadequate (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002). It is often the case that only “those children causing the most concern” are attended to (p. 176).

Greene (1995) suggests that teachers need “to refuse the artificial separation of the school from the surrounding environment” and become:

conscious of the dramas played out on the playgrounds and front stoops, in the hospital emergency rooms and clinics, and in the welfare offices and shelters and social agencies that affect the lives of the young. Police stations, churches, drug-dealers’ corners, shaded places in nearby parks, libraries, and always the blinking light of television screens: all these are part of the educational reality seen large. (p. 12)

Many of the people working within schools are well aware that schools are often “the first port of call for many families in crisis” (Senate Employment, 1998, The time devoted to non core teaching tasks section, ¶ 1; see also M. Kelly, 2004).

But it is not only their students’ social and emotional issues that confront teachers on a daily basis. With more parental involvement in schools, and the success of some schools in establishing more trusting relationships with parents, it is not unusual for teachers to be confronted by parents’ issues (M. Kelly, 2004; Webb & Vulliamy, 1996, 2002). This is sometimes the case for classroom teachers, but more often for teachers with leadership responsibilities, who act “as the lynch pin of parent school contact” (Cyster, Clift & Battle, 1979, as cited in Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 170). Teachers in leadership roles take on these extra responsibilities in order to “protect their staff from the stress” such involvement entails (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 171). Head teachers have reported that parents often seek their advice on a range of matters other than those strictly related to their children’s learning, behavioural and emotional difficulties (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002). Indeed, parents also:

confide personal problems – such as a breakdown in relationships, bereavement, physical abuse in the home, drug and alcohol problems and issues to do with housing and finance – in order to receive counselling and practical help for themselves and additional understanding for their children whose behaviour was likely to be adversely affected by these problems. (2002, p. 171)

For example, a British national survey discovered that 80% of head teachers have

discussed parents' marital problems with them (Cyster, Clift & Battle, 1979, as cited in Webb & Vulliamy, 2002).

Head teachers, too, commonly deal with angry and abusive parents about "disputes between parents and/or children," even those that arise outside of school (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 172). Unfortunately, parents sometimes take out their anger and aggression on teachers, causing the teachers some level of concern and anxiety (Skovholt & Yoo, 1999). However, teachers concerns about parental threats may be exaggerated, due to a misinterpretation of meaning attributable to cultural and class differences between parents from a "community that can't necessarily express itself easily or fluently" and "middle class professionals" (head teacher, as cited in Webb & Vulliamy, 2002; see also Lee, 2005). An alternative viewpoint is that parents may experience a "transference reaction" to school staff: their feelings about their own painful or fearful experiences at school are transferred to their relationship with their children's teachers (Jackson, 2002; Mayes, 2001; Salzberger-Wittenberg, Williams, & Osborne, 2005; Skovholt & Yoo, 1999; S. Weiss, 2002a, 2002b).

So, teachers have broadened their responsibilities to meet not only the many and varied needs of their students, but also those of their students' families. For many teachers, this burden of responsibility can seem overwhelming, and yet many are prepared to add to their professional responsibilities, possibly in the belief that "they may be a 'student's only salvation'" (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 386). Certainly, Nias found that many of the teachers in her study "saw themselves as people with a strong concern for the welfare of others; they wanted (sometimes passionately) to improve the lives or life-chances of children" (1989a, p. 32). This concern for the welfare of their students is important, as teachers are "significant others" – people whose opinions are valued, and who have the capacity to influence wellbeing and self-view – in the lives of those whom they teach (Bernard et al., 2007; Borich, 1999; Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998). "Indeed, for some children school may be the only place in which they experience a sense of being cared for in a consistent and predictable fashion, by adults who do not habitually put their own interests first" (Nias, 1997, p. 16).

As a result of the social work role they perform, teachers' emotional well-being may be compromised by "over-empathizing with students and taking on students' personal problems as their own" (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 394). In developing close,

trusting relationships with their students and becoming their confidantes, teachers place themselves at risk of becoming distressed by the situations in students' lives (Fischman et al., 2006); all too often these situations are those that teachers are powerless to change for the better. Rather than expecting teacher intervention, however, students may simply want teachers to be emotionally available to their pain (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 2005). Having a teacher who is prepared to listen "with sympathy and understanding" can provide valuable relief to students (p. 49). Teachers, however, face "the challenge of meeting students' needs without compromising their own personal and professional values" (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 392). And, when students do want a teacher's help to solve unsolvable problems, it can lead to teachers experiencing feelings of failure and "demoralized hopelessness" (Skovholt & Yoo, 1999, p. 6), because they are unable to help.

Given the conditions described above, it is little wonder that Robinson has suggested that teachers need to possess counselling skills (1996, as cited in Best, 2002; see also M. Kelly, 2004). Nias, however, expresses an alternative viewpoint, and has suggested that the altruistic and self-sacrificial nature of many teachers has caused them to be exploited by an uncaring system, and that teachers have been conned "into taking on, unpaid, work which would be better done by other trained professionals such as counsellors and social workers" (Nias, 1997, p. 21). Recognition that *both* students and teachers have "hearts that can be broken, [and] spirits that need to be fed" provides for the possibility of a more holistic view of education (Tompkins, 1996, p. xiii; see also Boy & Pine, 1971).

Summary

Teachers' work is complex, challenging, and subject to the ceaseless battering of relentless change. Furthermore, the bewildering speed of changes from within the educational system has resulted in the intensification of teachers' work, and greater accountability demands, which are compounded by the vastly under-resourced inclusion of a student cohort with a wide diversity of abilities and backgrounds in classrooms. Additionally, the teacher's role is impacted by numerous changes to contemporary society. The breakdown of the family unit, technology, alcohol and other drug use and addiction, and mental health issues have resulted in teachers taking on an increasing social work or welfare role. This is work for which few teachers are trained, and for which they receive little, if any, support. Teachers'

empathic response to their students' circumstances can result in teachers compromising their well-being in their attempts to "save" their students. Concern for the person who is the teacher has led to more frequent attempts to understand the teacher-as-person.



The teacher as a person

Teachers' work is an enterprise which draws on the personal reserves of teachers (Day, 1994; Nias, 1989a, 1989b). Teaching is also a practice that is profoundly relational and deeply emotional. This dissertation seeks to explore these aspects of teaching – the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the emotional – and to understand the outcomes of participation in MESH PD; an experience that emphasises the development of the teacher-as-person.

Intrapersonal practice

The perception that there is a line of demarcation between the personal and the professional lives of teachers has been disrupted by many writers¹¹ (see, for example, Akin, 2002; Beattie, 1995; Hargreaves, 1995, 1997b; Liston & Zeichner, 1991; Nias, 1989b; Palmer, 1998). Teachers do give of themselves in "unique and personal ways" and their "knowledge of teaching is multifaceted, embodied, and embedded in the narrative history of their lives" (Elbaz, cited in Beattie, 1995, pp. 6–7). It is surprising, then, that "an occupation which has for nearly 200 years attached great importance to the idea of knowing and catering for the individual child has paid little formal attention to the concept of the individual teacher" (Nias, 1989a, pp. 18–19; see also Nias, 1998). Nias believes that "the self is a crucial element in the way teachers themselves construe the nature of their job" (1989b, p. 155). This is confirmed by Goodson's observation that, "in the accounts they give about life in schools, teachers constantly refer to personal and biographical factors. From their point of view, it would seem that professional practices are embedded in wider life concerns" (1992c, p. 16).

There have been others, besides Jersild (1954, 1955), who have recognised the importance of the teacher's self, and of conceptualising and understanding the

¹¹ Although Woods has recognised that the ways in which teachers are "forced" to act are a "source of conflict ... between teacher as teacher, and teacher as person" (Woods, 1989, p. 89).

teacher as a person (see, for example, Banner & Cannon, 1997; Borich, 1999; Day, 2000; Day, Kingston, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Hamachek, 1999; Kottler et al., 2005; McDanald, Smith, & Sutherland, 1971; McDaniel, 1999; McKay, 1997; McLean, 1999; Natalicio & Hereford, 1971; Nias, 1984; Palmer, 1998; Rogers, 1971b; Tickle, 1999).

Although teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills are undoubtedly important (Banner & Cannon, 1997; Nias, 1989b), "the importance in teaching of the *teacher as a person* (as distinct from, though not as opposed to, the teacher as the possessor of occupational knowledge and skills)" must also be recognised (Nias, 1989b, p. 155; see also Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998; Kottler et al., 2005; Palmer, 1998). Indeed, it has been argued that the teacher as a person is *equally* as important as her or his knowledge and skills, and that the work that teachers perform is indistinguishable from who they are as people (Banner & Cannon, 1997). After all, personal dimensions, such as character and personality, have the capacity to determine the quality and effectiveness of teaching well before students become cognisant of their teacher's content knowledge or pedagogical skills (1997).

Teachers "exist as people before they become teachers," and they invest much of themselves in their work (Nias, 1989a, p. 2; see also Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998). It is Goodson's belief that it is important for research on teachers to develop knowledge of the teacher as a person (1981). Indeed, he says, "*in understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is*" (p. 69). The neglect of any ongoing conversation about "the human elements of teaching," such as character and personality, may be "because the very term 'professional' connotes the impersonal" (Banner & Cannon, 1997, p. 42). And yet, it is the more human elements that teachers bring to the art and craft of teaching that give them "their power as effective influencers" (Kottler et al., 2005, p. 2), and for which they may well be remembered by their students (see, for example, Barone, 2001; Walls, Nardi, von Minden, & Hoffman, 2002; Hamachek, as cited in S. Weiss, 2002b).

Teacher biography

Teachers' early observations and internalisation of their experiences as learners in classrooms are formative and have repercussions for how they are later, as teachers in their own classrooms (Lortie, 1975; see also Barone, 1987). The influence of this

“apprenticeship of observation” is persistent, despite exposure to educational theories and more contemporary pedagogical practices in formal teacher education classes (Lortie, 1975).

Beyond their own schooling, however, other aspects of teachers’ lives influence their teaching practice just as remarkably, and, as a result, each teacher thinks, feels and behaves in ways which are personally unique (Goodson, 1992d; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; J. G. Knowles, 1992; Nias, 1989a). Indeed, “the act of teaching, teachers’ experiences and the choices they make ... are deeply personal matters inexorably linked to [their] identity and, thus, [their] life story” (Carter & Doyle, 1996, p. 120; see also Goodson, 1997; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Yero, 2002). Consequently, factors beyond early schooling experiences – such as culture, biology and biography/life history – have been implicated in how teachers enact their professional lives (R. L. Butt & Raymond, 1987; R. L. Butt, Raymond, & Yamagishi, 1988; Goodson, 1992d; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; J. G. Knowles, 1992; G. Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1994; Nias, 1989b).

Teachers’ personal dispositions provide an “unconscious foundation” for their classroom behaviour (Yero, 2002, p. ix). It is known, for example, that:

teachers do not leave their values at the door when they enter their classrooms. On the contrary, as much as they might want to hide or avoid them, their values and beliefs slip in the door with them. In fact, teachers bring their entire autobiographies with them: their experiences, identities, values, beliefs, attitudes, hangups, biases, wishes, dreams, and hopes. (Nieto, 2003, p. 24; see also S. Weiss, 2002a; S. Weiss, 2002b)

Teachers’ professional lives and practices are, therefore, influenced by a “complex web of formative memories and experiences,” originating in their personal being (Brookfield, 1995, p. 49; see also Acker, 1988; Goodson, 1992d; Nias, 1989a; Polkinghorne, 1995). While these early influences manifest themselves as “patterns of thought” in the present day, they are not necessarily determining; people are capable of change (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 17; see also Seligman, 1994). However, understandings about the powerful influence of early experiences have led to the acknowledgement of the importance of teacher biography to teaching practice (Ayers, 1989; Barone, 1987; Bathmaker, Avis, & Kendall, 2003; Britzman, 1986; Davies & Adams, 2000; Erkkila, 2001; Goodson, 1992d, 1997; Krall, 1988; Mayfarth, 1954; Nias, 1989b; Nieto, 2003; Prado-Olmos & Ulanoff, 2004; Schempp, Sparkes, & Templin, 1999; S. Weiss, 2002a, 2002b).

Given these understandings about the importance of teacher biography and its influence on what happens in classrooms (Goodson, 1992d), it is unsurprising that a number of researchers have pondered the effects of teachers' personal lives on their practice. Huberman, for example, admits to a curiosity about "What events in teachers' private lives reverberate into the classroom?" and "What are the effects?" (1993, p. 3). Day and Bakioğlu have investigated, amongst other things, "the effects of [teachers'] personal life on work, such as having children of the same age as the students, losing a member of the family, having a supportive partner, having to look after a sick or disabled elderly relative" (1996, p. 207). Clearly, these researchers believe that investigations that explore aspects of teacher biography are appropriate, because personal aspects of teachers' lives can affect classroom interactions.

Interpersonal practice

In contemporary classrooms, the relationship between teachers and students has become central to how students engage with their studies. Teachers' work engages both teachers and their students affectively. Vygotsky believed that social relationships provide a crucial context for cognitive development, and this understanding has become a central belief (Goldstein, 1999) within the field of education. Goldstein believes "this suggests that the process of cognitive growth is inherently relational" (p. 648; see also Fischman et al., 2006). Furthermore, Day has pointed to the need for public recognition "that effective learning involves, essentially, an 'interactive chemistry' between learner and teacher" (2000, p. 108). This chemistry helps the formation of deep relationships "on multiple levels – intellectually, socially, emotionally" between teachers and their students, both within classrooms and outside of them (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 392). Contemporary understandings¹² acknowledge that these relationships can reward and sustain teachers, and have the potential to provide students with an impetus for learning (Fischman et al., 2006).

Teachers are responsible for providing students with an environment that is conducive to their learning, and to their social and emotional well-being, and growth (Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998). It is generally acknowledged that a positive classroom climate will "maximise the learning opportunities for all students" (p. 93),

¹² The cultivation of deep relationships with students has not historically been considered part of teachers' work (Brand, 1979).

and “the teacher is the key to developing an emotionally supportive environment” (p. 94).

Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth and Dobbins suggest that, in order to develop positive relationships with students, teachers “need to get to know each student individually. It is important to accept and care for each student as a unique individual” (1998, p. 95). They emphasise that the role of the teacher should not only be accommodating, but valuing of the unique nature of each child. Each child brings a number of individual qualities to a class, including “a diverse range of abilities, talents, attitudes, values, beliefs, experiences, backgrounds, interests, needs, physical skills, knowledge and capabilities” (Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998, p. 95). Teachers are responsible for recognising, valuing and nurturing these qualities in their students.

Unfortunately, a combination of the stresses incurred as a result of the intensification of teachers’ work, classroom power dynamics and emotions has the potential to create situations in which not all teacher-student relationships are as positive as they might otherwise be (Hargreaves, 1998a). Gordon implicates “roadblocks” – such teacher actions as “blaming, judging, criticising, preaching, ordering, labelling, threatening, being sarcastic, patronising and contradicting” – in impeding positive classroom communication (as cited in Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998, p. 189). He believes that such teacher actions:

are destructive to the development of positive relationships. They are ineffective because they convey unacceptance rather than acceptance and hence tend to make people feel judged or guilty and become defensive. Roadblocks are also destructive in the teaching-learning process because they often perpetuate an uncritical acceptance of the way things appear, rather than a considered view of the situation. For example, labelling a child as “lazy” is easy. What is much harder (and much more professional) is asking “why” – Why is that child behaving in a certain way? (as cited in Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998, p. 189)

The types of “cognitive and emotional misunderstandings” identified by Gordon are, according to Hargreaves, “chronic features of many schools and classrooms” (1998a, p. 839). He believes that it should be a “significant educational priority” to work towards creating classroom environments in which improved cognitive and emotional understandings are enabled (Hargreaves, 1998a, p. 840, 1998b, p. 321).

Teachers, then, need to be sensitive to their students, and to realise that “within each student there exists an array of values that influence the way [she or] he acts and reacts in any given situation” (Boy & Pine, 1971, p. 84). Sensitivity to these

underlying value structures – and to the ways in which these contribute to the uniqueness of individual students and give rise to students’ self expression (both in word and in action) – will assist teachers in becoming more closely attuned to the personhood of each student (1971). This does not mean that teachers need accept all that students say and do, but rather that they non-judgmentally and non-critically accept and value their students as unique human beings¹³ (Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998; Kottler et al., 2005). This unconditional acceptance of individual students is more readily attained by teachers who are self-aware and secure in their own self-acceptance (Borich, 1999; Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998).

Transference

Palmer’s cautionary perspective that “for better or worse” teaching “emerges from one’s inwardness” (1998, p. 2) recognises that, while teachers are conscious of some of what they do and how they interact, unconsciously they “teach who [they] are” (Hamachek, 1999, p. 209). Lack of teacher self-awareness has repercussions in the classroom, where teachers project their way of being onto their students (Palmer, 1998). Interactions between teachers and their students are both shaped and distorted by teachers’ developmental interpersonal experiences, and how they have dealt with these in the past (S. Weiss, 2002a, 2002b; see also Nias, 1989a; B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). This process – the “unconscious displacement of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from a previous significant relationship onto a current relationship” – is known as “transference” (Robertson, 1999, p. 152). As a consequence of this process, teachers’ seemingly objective and professional responses to, and decisions about, children may unconsciously be more subjectively- and personally-based than teachers realise, or believe possible (S. Weiss, 2002a).

Research into transference in classrooms suggests that it “significantly affects classroom outcomes” (S. Weiss, 2002b, p. 113). This suggests that teachers (and their students) “would benefit from [teachers] learning why they relate to others in a particular manner” (S. Weiss, 2002b, p. 113). When teachers consciously attempt to increase their self-awareness, and begin to understand the emotions and thought patterns that underpin their classroom interactions, both their teaching effectiveness and job satisfaction are enhanced (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). Teachers’ lives,

¹³ This notion equates to Standal’s “unconditional positive regard” for, and Dewey’s “prizing” of, others (C. R. Rogers, 1992, p. 831, 1995, p. 115).

their backgrounds and experiences, both personal and professional, should therefore be of great import and interest to those who study teachers and teaching (Clough, 2002; Goodson, 1992d). After all, “it is what teachers think, what teachers believe, and what teachers do at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people get” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992, p. xi).

Social backgrounds

Another important aspect that influences teachers’ practice is their social background (Goodson, 1997; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Nieto, 2003). Grant and Sleeter have argued that teachers frequently find it difficult to empathise with children whose social characteristics differ (sometimes markedly) from their own (1985, as cited in Acker, 1988). Tasmanian teachers, for example, are mostly middle-aged, middle-class, Australian-born, native English speakers (Teachers Registration Board, 2005), and are usually from a Christian or secular background. Consequently, when they (or teachers like them) are placed in schools where they are expected to teach and relate to students who come from backgrounds which are working-class, immigrant, non-English speaking, or non-Christian, there may be a problematic mismatch of values. Teaching “other people’s children” – children whose “ethnocultural or social class backgrounds” are sometimes substantially different from the teacher’s own – creates the potential for misunderstanding (Delpit, 1993, as cited in Hargreaves, 1998a, pp. 839–840, 1998b, p. 321).

As Goodson (1997) suggests, it can be a particularly valuable experience for students from working class families to be taught by teachers of similar background. However, while it may be easier for teachers to teach children with cultural and social backgrounds similar to their own, there are valuable insights to be gained when teachers’ and students’ origins differ, particularly if these differences can be accepted (1997). It is Kottler’s (2005) view that:

acceptance of others requires a great deal of tolerance, sensitivity, and cultural awareness. It means that you are knowledgeable about the diverse backgrounds from which your children originate, and that you demonstrate respect for their individual and cultural differences. When you can model this in your own behavior, then you can teach children to be tolerant of one another’s differences. (p. 55)

Thus, teachers who are aware of their own backgrounds, as well as the backgrounds of their students, may have greater potential to positively influence relationships

with, and between, students. Regrettably, there is little content in most teacher education courses that prepares teachers to meet the needs of students whose demographic differences are significantly different from their own (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Nieto, 2003).

The importance of teacher self-knowledge

Jersild believed that it is “an essential function of good education ... to help the growing child to know himself and to grow in healthy attitudes of self-acceptance” (1955, p. 13). Furthermore, there is considerable authoritative support for the view that it is an important part of the teacher’s role to assist students to maximise their potential self-development, and that students’ holistic development – mental, physical, emotional, social and spiritual – is essential to students learning to live full and healthy lives (Apps, 1996; Barry & King, 1998; Boy & Pine, 1971; Day, 2000; Department of Education, 2002). However, Jersild contended that:

a teacher cannot make much headway in understanding others or in helping others to understand themselves unless he is endeavouring to understand himself. If he is not engaged in this endeavor, he will continue to see those whom he teaches through the bias and distortions of his own unrecognized needs, fears, desires, anxieties, hostile impulses, and so on.

The process of gaining knowledge of self and the struggle for self-fulfilment and self-acceptance is not something an instructor *teaches* others. It is not something he does *to* or *for* them. It is something in which he himself must be involved. (1955, pp. 13–14)

Consequently, the fate of “what is probably the most important discovery” that students can make – the “discovery of themselves” (Jersild, 1950, p. vii, as cited in Smith, 2001, p. 282) – is reliant upon their teachers’ self-work, the work of knowing and accepting themselves (Jersild, 1954, 1955). Teachers’ self work is, therefore, fundamental to improving the outcomes of education for students, both in terms of their well-being and learning outcomes.

The argument for the importance of teachers’ self-knowledge may be long-standing, but it has lost none of its relevance. Consequently, Jersild’s message (1955) has been an inspiration to other scholars who have articulated their own understandings of the connection originally made by him. Greene expressed the view that self-understanding is important in coming to understand other people and their histories (1978b). Groundwater-Smith and colleagues understood that teachers’ intrapersonal relationships influence how they perceive others to be (1998). Palmer, too,

recognised the significance of the interconnectedness of the lives of teachers and their students (1998). Lipka and Brinthaupt, like Jersild, recognised that “a healthy sense of self for students is dependent upon interactions with teachers” (1999b, p. 2). And Nias (1997) and Nieto (2003) have both recognised the importance of the link between healthy teacher-student relationships and student achievement.

Teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and expectations guide them in their interactions with students and these personal qualities have the power to affect their students in a number of ways (Good & Brophy, 1997). Increasing teachers’ self-awareness – defined as “a process of getting in touch with your feelings and behaviors” (Gold & Roth, 1993, p. 141, as cited in B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003, p. 8) – has the potential to improve classroom interactions. Self-awareness precedes self-acceptance and acceptance of others (Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998). Crucially, self-acceptance is necessary before teachers can act effectively as significant others in the lives of their students (Borich, 1999). Teachers who are self-accepting:

do not perceive pupils as an extension of themselves or as a reflection of their personal and professional adequacy. Instead, they see pupils as individuals engaged in a learning process and understand that pupil performances and products reflect the nature of their previous experiences. Teachers’ unconditional acceptance of themselves and their students allows them to be sympathetic toward and supportive of pupils and at the same time constructively critical of their performances and products. In other words, they are able to use their power as a significant other to produce positive change in their classrooms. (Borich, 1999, p. 95)

The more aware that teachers “are of [their] own attitudes, beliefs, values, needs and emotions, the more [they] are able to understand the way [they] view the world and the impact this has on [their] interactions with people” (Groundwater-Smith et al., 1998, pp. 187–188; see also Borich, 1999; Jersild, 1955). Consequently, when teachers increase their self-awareness, they are more able to comprehend how their students affect their emotions and actions, and vice versa (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). Teacher self-awareness, therefore, is critical to improving teacher-student interactions.

Understandably, for those teachers who work with students who are emotionally and behaviourally challenged, increased self-awareness is even more critical (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). It is necessary for such teachers to have a sound understanding of their own reactions to emotionally stressful situations if they are to assist students with emotional and behavioural challenges (2003). Unfortunately it is

the case that:

certain students can provoke even the most concerned, reasonable, and dedicated teachers to act in impulsive, acrimonious, and rejecting ways (Long, 1996a). Students experiencing stress have the capacity to locate and activate unresolved issues in our own personal lives. Few of us possess the inner peace to respond in a calm and professional manner without conscious effort. Awareness of our primary emotional triggers improves our chances of making rational decisions based on conscious choice, rather than unconscious emotional conditioning. (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003, p. 9)

Thus, increased self-awareness has the potential to lead teachers to a better understanding of the impact of their personal values on students (Boy & Pine, 1971, p. 83), as well as to “minimize power struggles, and build more positive relationships with children with disabilities” (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003, p. 8). The evidence, then, is compelling that increased self-awareness can enhance teachers’ effectiveness and the satisfaction they derive from their work (2003).

Emotional practice

It is clear that teaching is an emotional occupation. However, emotion is considered to be a “slippery and elusive” concept (Zembylas, 2005b, p. 201), and it is perhaps for this reason that the emotional lives of teachers receive little attention in teacher education and in schools (Danforth & Smith, 2005). Nevertheless, in the relevant research, the emotional lives of teachers, and teaching as an emotional practice, are topics of increasing interest to a number of scholars (Bullough et al., 2006; Day & Leitch, 2001; Fullan, 1997; Golby, 1996; Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991; Hargreaves, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 2000, 2001, 2002; Kelchtermans, 2005; Nias, 1993; Zembylas, 2003c, 2003b, 2003a, 2005a, 2005b).¹⁴ It has been suggested that this interest in the emotional lives of teachers is connected to a realisation of the value of Jersild’s message (1954, 1955) that the inner life of teachers *is* a critically important component of their professional lives (Bullough et al., 2006).

Human “emotion, cognition and action” are, of recent times, understood to be “integrally connected” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 812; see also C. R. Rogers, 1995). Consequently, attempts to separate these aspects of our humanity, as researchers have done in the past, are now seen to be problematic (Day & Leitch, 2001; Weems, 2003; Zembylas, 2005b). Zembylas believes that there has been a “tendency ... to

perpetuate rather than challenge” the “deeply held dualisms of Western thought, which [have] sought to dichotomize reason from emotion, public from private, and mind from body” (p. xviii; see also Day & Leitch, 2001; C. R. Rogers, 1995). Day suggests that discussion of emotions in relation to education is considered controversial, and even irrelevant, by some (2001). As a result of this type of thinking, teachers’ emotional lives have been neglected by many in favour of cognitive topics (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991; Jersild, 1955; Kelchtermans, 2005; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Zembylas, 2005b). This artificial separation of the affective from the cognitive occurs despite the current understanding that teachers’ emotions significantly impact their teaching, and the learning of their students (Zembylas, 2005b). Too many of these teacher emotions and feelings, which commonly occur “at the interface of the person of the teacher and his or her professional identity,” remain unacknowledged in either the preparation or ongoing professional development of teachers (Day & Leitch, 2001, p. 403).

Teaching is described as a caring profession (Acker, 1995; Churchill et al., 1997; Nias, 1997, 1999; Nieto, 2003; Skovholt & Yoo, 1999; Tirri & Husu, 2002; Vogt, 2002), and, either consciously or unconsciously, teachers regularly engage in acts of caring (Forrester, 2005). Nias has identified different ways in which (primary) teachers care, including through nurturing affective relationships with their students (Nias, 1997, 1999). Consequently, it is not unusual for teachers to admit to liking, or even loving, their students (Agne, 1999; Nias, 1989a; Rosiek, 1994).

In a recent study (Walls et al., 2002), there was a clear link shown between teachers’ care and their effectiveness; teachers described by their students as caring, warm and friendly were often amongst those also considered by them to be most effective. Conversely, teachers described as ineffective, were more often remembered for their focus on “tests, feedback, grades, assignments, and homework” (p. 47). In comments regarding the qualities of effective and ineffective teachers, the affective category of care was remarked upon more often than were the teacher’s skill, motivation, their student participation and their focus on rules and grades. Students obviously consider care to be a worthwhile teacher attribute. It is, indeed, sad that “beautiful human relations are not high on the priority list of the ... bureaucracy” (Rosiek,

¹⁴ Although, in their review of the literature on “teachers’ emotions and teaching,” Sutton and Wheatley have expressed the view that “there is surprisingly little recent research about the emotional aspects of teachers’ lives” (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003, p. 327).

1994, p. 25).

Nias considers that there is a need to recognise commitment as another central concept in attempts to understand teachers (1989a), and many teachers are passionately committed to their students, their learning and well-being (Hargreaves, 1998a; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). She describes how teachers, in their interviews with her, repeatedly raised the issue of commitment – both their own and that of their colleagues. They contrasted, dichotomously, those teachers who take their job seriously and those who do not (1989a). Commitment, in their view, was descriptive of “the amount and quality of thought and energy with which individuals address their work” (p. 30).

All teachers need to balance their commitment to “performing” (fulfilling their obligations to the education system) with their commitment to “caring” (doing their best for their students), and often they struggle to fulfil these competing demands, which all too frequently maintain an uncomfortable coexistence (Forrester, 2005, p. 274). Unfortunately, as Forrester has observed:

when greater importance is placed on one, the other is adversely affected. So in the current climate, where policy-makers are overly concerned with activities that can be measured (performance), these are given prominence while other activities (caring) become less viable [for teachers]. (pp. 274–275)

Consequently, contemporary reform policies have a tendency to affect the relationships that teachers have with students in their care, and thus subvert “the very heart of teaching” (Kelchtermans, 2005, p. 999), potentially exacerbating an already fraught situation. For many teachers, their wholehearted commitment to their students calls for total self-investment in their work, “sometimes at a personal cost” (Forrester, 2005, p. 274; see also Acker, 1995).

The care and commitment that teachers feel towards their work is undoubtedly problematic, in that teachers’ work is so open-ended; there is always more that teachers believe could, or perhaps should, be done (Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991; Nias, 1997). Almost inevitably, teachers find themselves caught up in “an unending process of constant giving” (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991, pp. 498–499; see also Nias, 1997). And, if they feel they are unable to live up to the standards they set for themselves (or the standards they believe are expected of them by others) they may experience pervasive feelings of guilt (Acker, 1995; Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991; Kelchtermans, 2005; Nias, 1997). Equally, when they feel that their teaching

competence may be questioned, anxiety results, and “fundamental competence anxiety; anxiety about appearing incompetent to one’s colleagues and oneself” is experienced by many teachers (D. Hargreaves, 1980, as cited in Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991, p. 500). Nevertheless, there are collaborative workplace cultures which tend to reduce teachers’ feelings of anxiety by consciously taking steps to do so, but in workplaces “where doubts cannot be aired, and problems cannot be shared, teachers can become trapped in having to construct and maintain a persona of perfectionism” (p. 500). Such an environment can inevitably become quite destructive to them. Unfortunately, too, many teachers’ anxieties do not stop at the end of the school day, for teachers’ dreams reveal that their concerns about being judged by others, and their mulling over of problems, extend beyond their waking hours (Bullough et al., 2006; Nias, 1997).

In addition to their work-related concerns, teachers (and their families) are not immune from societal pressures, and their “personal problems *do* intrude on professional performance” (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991, p. 500). Having to admit to their own imperfection or acknowledge that they are experiencing personal difficulties by seeking professional help also causes teachers anxiety (1991). This may be especially true for those who have grown up accepting, and attempting to live up to, the moral authority of religious beliefs and practices (1991).

Teachers’ occupational well-being

From the evidence presented thus far, there can be no doubt that teaching is a stressful occupation. The noticeable rise in stress in teaching in recent years has been attributed to “the restructuring of education and schools that has dominated the last decade or so, from the rational-technocratic discourse of performativity, heavy duty accountability, hierarchical managerialism, and intensification” (Woods & colleagues, as cited in Woods & Carlyle, 2002, p. 170). It is conflicts such as those between the mandates of education department policy and the values that teachers hold dear that can result in teachers becoming “literally demoralized,” and experiencing a “sense of loss and bereavement” (Nias, as cited in Hargreaves, 1998a, pp. 841, 837). Certainly, teachers’ beliefs about the purposes of education are “much broader than those of official reform agendas,” and teachers clearly value their students’ “emotional and social outcomes as well as cognitive ones” (Hargreaves, 1998a, p. 845).

In the light of the conflict between departmental expectations and those of teachers,

Nias believes that teachers need to develop an understanding of “the practical consequences and costs for themselves and others” of their care orientation, for the all-embracing nature of the caring that teachers perform undoubtedly takes a toll on their health (Nias, 1997, p. 21; see also Acker, 1995). Indeed, the self-sacrificing attitude of teachers leads many to give of themselves “to the point of exhaustion and often beyond” (Nias, 1999, p. 76), resulting in them becoming “impoverished as people and as practitioners because they care too much” (Nias, 1997, p. 11). Certainly, “no-one’s interests are served when the path to school improvement is paved with the ashes of burnt out teachers” (p. 21). In fact, the growing rate at which teachers are leaving the profession due to ill health suggests that, rather than being subjected to continual “politically inspired criticism,” teachers (like their students) need “informed caring support” (Day, 2000, p. 107).

If they are to be effective in their work, there can be no doubt that teachers’ “emotional health is crucial” to them (Day & Leitch, 2001, p. 403). Furthermore, given the stressful nature of the caring work that they perform, it is essential for teachers to maintain a balance between their care of others, and their self-care (Skovholt & Yoo, 1999). While “the demands of others are important” so are the emotional and physical needs of teachers, and it is necessary for teachers to feel like “whole, valuable” people before they are able to “do justice to others or to [themselves]” (Satir, 1978, pp. 36–37). The implication is that, without having the knowledge and making available the time necessary to be able to care for their own emotional health and well-being, teachers will be unable to care for others as they would wish (Bullough et al., 2006; Nias, 1997; Skovholt & Yoo, 1999).

It is important, then, for teachers to find suitable ways to address the stresses of their work. Teachers’ self-awareness, for example, has been identified as an essential element in stress management (Gold & Roth, 1993, as cited in B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). Consequently, it is vital that teachers become self-aware and begin to understand the importance of their emotional health, and “of attending to rather than repressing the powerful feelings that often accompany and shape a teacher’s life” (Bullough et al., 2006, p. 206). A few attempts to have teachers attend to their feelings have been reported in the literature. Jackson (2002), for example, reported on the benefits to teachers of staff work discussion groups. In these groups, teachers were able to share their classroom stories which reduced their feelings of isolation, frustration and despair. Another support initiative, “a telephone helpline” for UK

teachers, reportedly averaged 1000 calls per month in its first 6 months, with a quarter of calls relating to teachers' work being linked to "stress, anxiety or depression" (Passmore, 2000, as cited in Clough, 2002, p. 76).

Like others in the community, at one extreme, some teachers undoubtedly need the kind of help that can only be provided by therapy (Bullough et al., 2006; Jersild, 1955). However, for most teachers there is value in talking about issues that present as problematic, and "building a supportive professional problem-solving community" may improve the situation for at least some teachers (Bullough et al., 2006, p. 206). It is suggested that "when external conditions cannot be changed, talking, managing the emotions and learning to cope may be all that is left" (Alfi et al., 2004, as cited in Bullough et al., 2006, p. 207). Nias, for example, found that teachers yearned for and appreciated opportunities to talk with supportive colleagues about not only the extreme lows of their work – "their sense of worthlessness and failure," "terror, anxiety and rage" – but also the highs – "their moments of excitement, fulfilment and extreme happiness" (1998, p. 1260). Teachers wanted colleagues who were "sensitive to their emotional needs," yet they often felt emotionally isolated in a climate of "professional privacy" (p. 1260).

The most common way to investigate school staff health has been to examine occupational fatigue and stress factors (Saaranen, Tossavainen, Turunen, & Vertio, 2006). However, Saaranen and colleagues explored the process of "individual empowerment," which is "concerned with individuals gaining mastery over their lives" (p. 741). This type of approach recognises that a person's outlook on life has consequences for that person's physical and mental health, and, ultimately, on the aging process, and the length of that person's lifespan (Seligman, 1991). However, to change a person's outlook requires them to learn appropriate strategies, and the strategies necessary for such change are not usually the subject of teacher education programs or PD.

In stressful circumstances, many teachers resort to taking leave because of the anxiety they suffer, while others choose to leave the profession they once loved in order to preserve their mental and physical health (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Talmor et al., 2005). With more support for teachers, the situation might be changed to achieve more positive outcomes for them.

Personal development as professional development

The rapid social, political and technological developments occurring within society, as well as the demands of disciplinary pressure groups, government and minority interests, and the advancement of theories of cognition and learning, have meant that school teachers, like other professionals, are increasingly faced with the requirement for the continual expansion of their professional knowledge and skills (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004; Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Day, 2000; Gravani, 2007; Sikes, 1992; Taylor, 1980). It has long been recognised, too, that initial teacher education programs, “by their very nature ... cannot equip intending teachers with all they need for a lifetime of work in the classroom” (Taylor, 1980, p. 327; see also Day, 2000; Day & Sachs, 2004b). No longer regarded as an option, professional growth is now considered to be an integral and vital part of a teacher’s role (Day & Sachs, 2004a), and this has resulted in a systemic growth in professional development opportunities for teachers.

Professional development (PD) is variously referred to in the literature as “continuing professional development” (CPD), “teacher professional development,” “in-service education and training” (INSET), “professional learning” (PL), “teacher development” and “teacher learning.” A number of definitions exist (see for example, Bell & Gilbert, 1994; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Kelchtermans, 2004; Taylor, 1980), however for the purposes of this study I draw on Day’s (1999) definition of continuing professional development:

Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives. (1999, p. 4)

This “encompassing definition” (Kelchtermans, 2004, p. 3) goes beyond the view of development as simply growth over time and within the professional context. It makes specific reference to forms of development that are more consciously undertaken, as well as having a reflective, committed, collegial, philosophical and outcomes-focused orientation. The inclusion of an affective element – the concept of emotional intelligence – specifically acknowledges that professional development can

occur in domains other than the cognitive. Regrettably, this emotional dimension of professional learning is much-neglected in the literature (Gravani, 2007, p. 12). However, Day's definition does recognise that there are moral and affective as well as academic purposes inherent in teaching, and acknowledges the role of teachers as agents of change. Rather than focusing wholly on the need for results that are measurable as outcomes-based student improvement, Day emphasises the contribution that teacher development can make to educational quality (Day cited in Kelchtermans, 2004). Importantly, he supports a broad, holistic vision for the purposes of schooling.

In 1980, Taylor maintained that "some of the literature of teacher education contain[ed] an implicit or explicit assumption that 'professional development' and 'personal development' are distinguishable processes" (p. 327). He argued, instead, that "they are one and the same" (p. 327). It has since been suggested that "how we regard teaching has a profound impact on the kind of staff development we permit" (Egan, as cited in John Smyth, 1998, p. 1246). Consequently, regarding teaching as a personal enterprise, and teachers as people, allows for the possibility of accepting personal development as a means of professional development.

The development of the teacher-as-person as a facet of teacher PD has been neglected, partially at least, because there has been an all-consuming emphasis on economics, accountability and mandatory testing in the provision of education throughout the past half a century (Forrester, 2005; Ingersoll, 2003). This over-emphasis on the development of the procedural and cognitive aspects of teaching, in the view of Hargreaves, is usually counter-productive because it "tends to miss what lies deep inside teachers, what motivates them most about their work. However conscientiously it is done, the reflective glance can never get to the emotional heart of teaching" (1995, p. 21). Yet, it is these affective aspects of teaching which are frequently neglected by "even the most innovative" of teacher development initiatives (p. 21).

While some attention has been given to the teacher's "inner terrain" (Day et al., 2006; McDaniel, 1999; Nias, 1984, 1989a; Warin, Maddock, Pell, & Hargreaves, 2006), there is little research evidence to suggest that the importance of the development of the "teacher-as-person" has been promoted or encouraged by education systems. Yet, concerns about teachers' self-knowledge, and questions

regarding their personal growth, have been pondered by Gardner, who concluded that “just how instruction in the personal realm should ideally take place is not known” (1993, p. 255).

The connection that exists between teachers’ self-awareness and the well-being of students has also been neglected in teacher education (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). This lack of attention has caused Palmer to question its absence:

How can schools educate students if they fail to support the teacher’s inner life? To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world. How can schools perform their mission without encouraging the guides to scout out that inner terrain? (1998, p. 6)

Teachers all have differing backgrounds, experiences and needs, and differ in terms of the personal development skills that they bring to their professional role (S. M. Johnson, 2004; Kelchtermans, 2004). If societal demands for schools staffed by quality teachers are to be met, then governments and education systems need to understand that teachers need to be more than successful deliverers of subject-specific content (Day, 2000). Consequently, teacher professional development, while supporting the individual needs of teachers, must go “far beyond the mechanics of teaching” (p. 113), and “be concerned with the whole teacher as a person, since it is the teachers’ whole self that brings significance to the meaning of the teaching act” (p. 108). It must be acknowledged, too, that “personal development [is] often influenced by factors outside the professional and teaching work of the teacher,” but that it is “pivotal” and “essential” to teacher development in that it precedes professional development, and influences its pace (Bell & Gilbert, 1994, p. 494).

Summary

While teachers in contemporary classrooms are faced with changing societal circumstances which have led to an increase in their “social work” role, their needs are seldom addressed by either initial teacher education or in-service professional development initiatives (Fischman et al., 2006). Unfortunately, it appears that there is little help offered to teachers who are often overwhelmed by the “little publicized ... issues of how to relate personally to students,” and little guidance given as to how to cope effectively with students’ issues (Fischman et al., 2006, p. 395). Yet, teachers “do have a crucial role to play in making a difference to the lives of students” (Day, 2000, p. 110). In order to develop schools, and improve the support given to students and their teachers, “static or linear conceptions of teacher education must

be replaced by a holistic understanding of the inter-relatedness of teachers' personal and professional development" (European Assembly of Teacher Trade Unions, as cited in Day, 2000, p. 108). After all, "investment in the whole person as worker is recognised [throughout the business world] as crucial to the health of the organisation" (Day, 2000, p. 109).



Storying our selves

There are two distinctly different, but complementary ways in which human beings order their experience of the world; two different "ways of knowing," which Bruner described as *paradigmatic* and *narrative* (1986, p. 11).¹⁵ Paradigmatic knowledge, he suggests, "deals in general causes, and in their establishment, and makes use of procedures to assure verifiable reference and to test for empirical truth" (p. 13). Narrative knowledge "deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course" and leads "to good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily 'true') historical accounts" (p. 13). Although narrative has existed across time and across cultures, Bruner's recognition of "narrative knowledge" as a legitimate "mode of thought" (p. 11) challenged the then-dominant logico-scientific world view.

Storying events in our lives appears to be a naturally occurring phenomenon (Pennebaker, 2000), and the capacity for storying is considered one of the defining characteristics of the human species (Landau, 1997). The capacity for narrative is generally developed early in life, so that by 6 years of age most children are capable of understanding, and telling, stories (Abbott, 2002; McAdams, 1993). Indeed, "like historians who tell stories about the past, people tell stories about their [lives]" (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 6). Story-telling to ourselves, and the construction of stories as narratives to others, gives us a way to bring order to otherwise independent and sometimes chaotic events experienced throughout our lifespan, and helps us to make sense of our selves and our place in the world (Bolton, 2006; Bruner, 2002; Pennebaker, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988; Stuhlmiller, 2001). Incorporating events into a coherent story (or stories) of our selves leads to a sense of "personal wholeness" (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 2; see also McAdams, 1993).

¹⁵ An idea Bruner (1986, p. xiii) attributes to the work of William James.

As a result of the process of logically sequencing events into stories, both narrator and audience become active participants in making meaning from them. There is, then, a strong association between narrative understanding and meaning making (Abbott, 2002; Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1991, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1988). Indeed, Abbott uses specific examples from visual art to make the point that we try and construct meaning from “even the most static and uneventful scenes” (p. 11). For example, he asserts that if we are unable to discern a narrative in an artwork, meaning may be elusive and we will disengage from it.

Once events are incorporated into story form they are much easier to remember than disembodied facts (Bolton, 2006; McAdams, 1993), and even very young children are capable of recalling and enjoying complex storied sequences of events (Premack, 1979). Consequently, it is unsurprising, perhaps, that in the process of recalling past events stored in memory, and creating order from them, we “compose the stories of our lives” (Greene, 1978a, p. 33), and in this way each of us creates a unique identity. Self-making, then, is “the product of self-telling” (Bruner, 2002, p. 99).

From a baby’s very first day outside the womb, she or he begins to collect the data which contributes to her or his identity. Furthermore:

the years of infancy and childhood provide us with some of the most important raw material for our identities. The first two years of life leave us with an unconscious legacy that especially affects the narrative tone of our story. It is a legacy about hope and trust and about how the world works and how stories are supposed to turn out. (McAdams, 1993, p. 40)¹⁶

The stories of our early childhood are strongly influenced by the stories of the cultural contexts in which we live. Our cultural immersion imbues us with “the collective norms, mores, values, prejudices, and preconceptions that have evolved over time” (Wetherell, 1991, p. 85; see also Bolton, 2006). Through stories we learn not only about who we are, but also about “where we belong, what is right and what is wrong” (Bolton, 2006, p. 205). The modelling of those around us provides us with an implicit understanding about “what selfhood should be, might be – and, of course, shouldn’t be” (Bruner, 2002, p. 65). Thus, values and beliefs are deeply embedded during childhood, and, as a consequence, our value systems are most often subconscious (Korthagen, 1993) or taken-for-granted, “and are sustained with

¹⁶ Seligman (1994) reminds us, too, of the influence of genetic inheritance on childhood, and adult, development.

minimal consciousness on our part” (Wetherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 85). Nonetheless, hidden from us though they might be, we come to define our selves by them (Korthagen, 1993; Wetherell & Noddings, 1991). These self-definitions are generally reasonably stable by about late adolescence¹⁷ (Kroger, 1996; McAdams, 1993). Furthermore, the values and beliefs established early in our lives continue their foundational influence throughout the entire lifespan (Korthagen, 1993). Consequently, our patterns of behaviour, which result from our values and beliefs, become habituated, and we become “very skilled in their defence, to the extent that in new situations we try to recreate the relationships which sustain and perpetuate the values from which our view of ourselves derives” (Nias, 1989a, p. 21).

Our internalised self-view gives our lives meaning (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). Indeed, the “most self-defining” of our values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours largely contribute to our “substantial self” (Nias, 1989a, p. 21). Even through introspection and self-examination, the substantial self is “hard to reach,” “well defended” and highly resistant to change, partly because people are skilful at developing strategies to avoid having to change their self-perceptions (Nias, 1989b, p. 21). Whether or not we like our selves or our lives, we generally become comfortable with the self and the life known most intimately to us. Even changes which may appear to us to be logical, and welcome, may commonly be difficult to make.

Whilst immersion within cultural contexts has a defining role in the development of self, relationships with “significant others” and “reference groups” are equally important to perceptions of self, setting a standard by which comparisons can be made (Bruner, 2002; Forgas & Moylan, 2000; Nias, 1989b; Wetherell, 1991). In our conversations and interactions with others, their attitudes towards us become known to us, and these attitudes influence our self-view (Nias, 1989a).¹⁸ In this way it can be understood that although the self is autonomous, it is also “profoundly relational” (Bruner, 2002, p. 86; Wetherell & Noddings, 1991). The self attempts to maintain a balance between autonomy and connectedness, as “do the self-narratives we tell ourselves” (Bruner, 2002, p. 65) and others. As Bruner has speculated, “telling others about oneself is, then, no simple matter. It depends on what *we* think *they* think we

¹⁷ However, adolescence is a historically and socio-culturally defined concept, and has not been, and is not, recognised within all societies (Kroger, 1996).

¹⁸ Although people generally choose to associate with people who confirm their existing self-view.

ought to be like – or what selves in general ought to be like” (2002, p. 66).

Our cultural immersion, our social relationships, and our intimate, caring relationships, together with the countless events that occur across the lifespan, result in the formation of “one’s own unique identity” (Jung, 1963, as cited in Witherell, 1991, p. 89). Consequently, our self-making stories establish our unique identities, at the same time as they distinguish us from others and the stories that they tell us of themselves (Bruner, 2002; McAdams, 1996; Witherell, 1991). Through this process of storying our selves, we seek to establish and maintain connectedness with others but at the same time we have a powerful desire to remain autonomous, to be similar to but different from others in our lives. Therefore, the stories that we tell ourselves and others enable us to “put those fragmentary pieces together” (Bruner, 2002, p. 100; see also McAdams, 1993) to form a personal sense of self.¹⁹

The process of self-making that occurs during our telling of stories goes on endlessly, as we incorporate new stories into the on-going stories we have accumulated over time (Bruner, 2002). It is a complex and volatile process that is so integral to the construction of our selves that:

if our lives weren’t constantly told and retold, storying each new experience, we would have no coherent notion of who we are, where we are going, what we believe, what we want, where we belong and how to be. ... my psychosocial selfhood relies upon my grasp of my narratives of relationship, chronology and place. (Bolton, 2006, p. 206)

Indeed, our self-making is “a dialectical process, a balancing act. And despite self-assuring homilies about people never changing, they do. They rebalance their autonomy and their commitments, usually in a way that honors what they were before” (Bruner, 2002, p. 84; see also Bolton, 2006). So, paradoxically, our selves change, but, at the same time, maintain consistency (Bruner, 2002; McAdams, 1993, 1996).

Critical incidents

As we construct and re-construct our selves in the telling and re-telling of our stories, we use our experiences – selected memories from the past, and knowledge of the present – to point towards a possible future (Bruner, 2002; McAdams, Josselson, &

¹⁹ McAdams is careful, however, “not to make the broader claim that life stories serve to integrate all of personality or the person’s entire life” (McAdams, 1993, pp. 309–310).

Lieblich, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988).²⁰ As we have new experiences, we incorporate these into the stories we tell, telling and retelling our stories in a variety of ways (Mishler, 2004). It seems that we are always looking for a way of telling our story that fits best with our current understanding of our selves. We are relentlessly “revising the plot” (McAdams et al., 2001, p. xv) by continually reinterpreting our past, and re-envisaging our anticipated future, in the light of our current understanding and positioning (Ezzy, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1988). In this way, our identities can be seen neither as “fixed constructs” nor as “completely flexible and malleable. Rather, they are somewhat stable, but continually reinterpreted” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 96; see also Bolton, 2006), as we create for ourselves “a meaningful niche in the psychosocial world” (McAdams, 1997, p. 5 as cited in Landman, 2001, p. 38).

Although our lives are subject to constant change, there are some transitions which stand out as “especially significant in the life course” (McAdams et al., 2001, p. xv). Some of these events are traumatic and “may crucially affect perceptions and practice,” and can be described as “critical incidents” (Goodson, 1997, p. 149; see also J. M. Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999). It is thought that, at least in part, the strong emotions involved in critical incidents cause them to be encoded differently in memory (Pennebaker, 1997; J. M. Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999). Often, such life-changing events are difficult to assimilate into our self stories, because they seem not to fit well with our current self-understanding. To successfully incorporate critical incidents into our self stories, it is important that we find personal meaning in our “subjective experience through narrative rather than empirical fact” (McAdams, 1993, p. 49). It is not the facts of divorce, illness, accident or death, for example, that we struggle with, but how such traumas fit with the stories of our selves that we have already constructed, and how they disrupt the anticipated futures we have plotted for our selves within our self stories (McAdams, 1996). Out of our “need to understand why a crisis occurred and what its impact has been ... [we] must construct a personal story to make sense of the event” (McAdams, 1993, p. 49). Given our human need to make meaning of our lives, however, the eventual incorporation of critical incidents into our stories is necessary (Bamberg, 1997). We do this by a process of continual telling and retelling on different occasions and to different audiences (Mishler, 2004), either spontaneously or intentionally (Kenyon & Randall, 1997), so that our “life

²⁰ The possession of a hopeful future orientation is important to mental health (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988; Seligman, 1991, 1994, 2002; Skovholt & Yoo, 1999).

stories are always twice-, thrice-, indeed endlessly retold tales” (Mishler, 2004, p. 101). Storying and re-storying our major transitions, or turning points, helps us to “cope with challenges and stress,” contributes to “how we see the future,” and helps us “to determine the nature of our interpersonal relationships and our unique positionings in the social and cultural world” (McAdams et al., 2001, p. xv).

Having an “incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account” of our selves can lead to illness (Marcus, 1974, as cited in McAdams, 1993, p. 33). It is known, for example, that “some psychological problems and a great deal of emotional suffering stem from our failures to make sense of our lives through stories” (McAdams, 1993, p. 33).²¹ Indeed, neither the suppression nor denial of emotion can be sustained if we want to maintain good mental health (Landman, 2001). Certainly, the life-long process of self-construction through story-telling is an act of human necessity, not only for the creation of self, but also for our mental well-being.

Storytelling

Autobiographical storytelling is not always an easy endeavour because “a life story is not simply that which has escaped forgetting,” rather, every “act of remembrance is a choosing, a highlighting, a shaping, an enshrinement (even when it hurts)” (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 31). Therefore, when constructing an autobiographical story, “constitutive details of experience” are selected from memory, reflected upon, and sequenced into a coherent and meaning-full whole (Seidman, 1991, p. 1). And in the construction of stories, meaning is of particular importance. Indeed, as McAdams (1993) tells us:

Stories are less about facts and more about meanings. In the subjective and embellished telling of the past, the past is constructed – history is made. History is judged to be true or false not solely with respect to its adherence to empirical fact. Rather, it is judged with respect to such narrative criteria as “believability” and “coherence.” There is a narrative truth in life that seems quite removed from logic, science, and empirical demonstration. It is the truth of a “good story.” (pp. 28–29)

In telling a “good story,” the storyteller, or narrator, needs to make choices not only about the particular event being storied, but also about how the story is told, “how to frame its antecedents and consequences, and what conclusions to draw from it”

²¹ Although, as McAdams (1996) has suggested, “psychiatric disorders of many kinds and other serious problems in living have multiple determinants and levels of meaning that are outside the domain of identity and the life story” (p. 314). Having a coherent narrative is not a “cure all.”

(McAdams & Bowman, 2001, p. 29). The narrator also concerns her- or himself with audience, and will tell a story differently to different audiences, in different contexts, and for different purposes (Kenyon & Randall, 1997; McAdams, 1993).

Any story told about an event in our past, too, is told from today's vantage point, and is influenced not only by what we are able to remember of the event, but by what we know has happened in the intervening period of time (Bruner, 2002; McAdams, 1993). It is, then, no longer the same story that we could have told at the time, or just after, the actual event occurred (Bruner, 2002), but evolves as we gain new life experience, create new understandings, and re-tell it to different audiences.

Raising stories to consciousness

Notwithstanding the value that we place on our personal stories, it is all too easy for our stories to remain unexamined – for them to “be essentially self-affirming and uncritical,” or to act as “censoring tools” – so that we tend to explore only those issues that are safe and comfortable, rather than those that might be sensitive (Bolton, 2006, p. 204). The process of “raising experience to the level of conscious reflection and dialogue, whether through speaking aloud or writing, enables new forms of critical interrogation” (Day & Leitch, 2001, p. 406). Thus, the interrogation of, and reflection on, our stories is important if we are to gain self-understanding.

We all have stories which are safe, and that “we *like* to tell” – “signature stories” (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 47). These signature stories are the “tried and true, practiced and polished” stories that are told often, and “create a particular impression” about who we are (p. 46). Interrogating these stories can be quite revealing, because they tell us about how we perceive ourselves or “would like to be perceived by others;” about the general tone and plot of our lives; as well as:

what turns us on or makes us tick; about turning points in our path; about why our life has taken the course it has ... about our fundamental beliefs, our convictions and values, habits and idiosyncracies; something about our hopes and fears, and our limits. (p. 47)

As well as our own stories, however, it is also important that we revisit and examine our family stories, for these are the stories that can help us to “understand who we are or where we have come from” (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 45). Family stories ““reveal the major sources of authorship that were influential in penning the scripts’ of our lives – authorship we need to critique if we are ever to author ourselves”

(Parry & Doan, 1994, pp. 70–71, as cited in Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 45). Indeed, the ability to author ourselves is a sign that we are in control of our stories, rather than our stories (or others' stories of us)²² having control over us.

If we are prepared to interrogate the “texts of our own experience” (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 2), those texts – like the study of literary texts – can lead us to “discover and celebrate our personal, ordinary wisdom,” and also provide us with lessons which are life-changing (p. 2). First, however, there is the challenge of being open to the process of interrogation, which means that we must be prepared to tell our stories to ourselves or to others, either by talking (e.g., to a close friend²³ or relative, a counsellor or “therapist, the proverbial stranger-on-the-train we expect never to meet again,” or by audio-recording), by writing (e.g., journaling, poetic and autobiographical forms), or through performing them (e.g., dramatic expression, video diaries) (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 49). Kenyon and Randall describe the processes of storytelling, storylistening, and restorying our experiences as “therapy for the sane” (p. 2), perhaps because putting our stories into language is an essential first step in coming to terms with our selves (McAdams, 1993).

Sharing secrets and self-disclosure

While signature stories are easy to tell to a diverse audience in a range of contexts, it is another matter altogether to share with others a story about one's current or past life situations that the intended audience would not normally know or discover. These secret stories “are stories – partial or complete, fuzzy or precise, innocent or dark (skeletons in the closet, for instance)” (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 49), and they are often about the events in our lives which concern us the most (Jersild, 1955).

We each take on roles for which family and society impose definitions of what constitutes appropriate behaviour (McAdams, 1993). This social conditioning leads us to “restrict our public performances to the limits that the roles impose” (Jourard, 1979, p. 182).²⁴ Consequently, in the stories we tell, we generally reveal ourselves to

²² See, for example, Josselson's story of her patient, Heidi, who appeared not to have her own story, but to view herself “as living a predesigned narrative created by her mother” (2004, p. 119).

²³ Shabatay has queried whether the social “isolation imposed on us by contemporary society has resulted in the weakening of long-lived, close friendships, so that the absence of proven loyalty and trust often means that we have no one to talk to” (Shabatay, 1991, p. 143).

²⁴ Gender roles, for example, limit our public performances, and men (and boys) have been “conditioned to forbid [themselves] to feel” (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 122). Biddulph describes men as being “isolated from each other by a tradition of silence, trapped by the culture and the

be within the:

range that is deemed sane, legal, and good. Indeed, we are socialized to believe that if we even think, feel, and wish beyond the role-defined ways, then we will experience ourselves as mad, criminal, and evil.²⁵ We may be imprisoned, hospitalized, or ostracized if others learn that there is more to our experience than they presently see. (Jourard, 1979, pp. 182–183)

It is a courageous act, then, to step outside the limits imposed upon us by our social roles and reveal our authentic selves to others by telling our secret stories (Jourard, 1979). However, we do want our authentic selves to be known and accepted by others, just as they accept our public semblances (Kenyon & Randall, 1997). Our knowledge that a gap exists between the selves we know and the selves we present to the world can weigh heavily on our minds (Jourard, 1979; Kenyon & Randall, 1997). Furthermore, the effort required to maintain an acceptable public semblance can take a toll on physical and mental health (Jourard, 1979).

The process of self-disclosure requires that a high level of trust exists between the teller and the listener. Yet, when we choose to self-disclose to another, a tension exists between our desire to reveal our authentic selves and our desire for our stories to be safe with that person (Kenyon & Randall, 1997). We do not usually wish, for example, to become the subject of secondary social sharing.²⁶ Understandably, then, self-disclosure is a difficult choice, because “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world” (King, 2003, p. 10), and as a result, those who decide to self-disclose place themselves at risk of being judged, and possibly rejected, by those who hear their story (or some version of it).

Sharing secret stories with a stranger, or strangers, then, may sometimes be a safer choice than to reveal ourselves to intimate others, and put at risk a significant interpersonal relationship (Shabatay, 1991). Additionally, Shabatay reminds us that those who (think that they) know us well, may confront us with issues that a stranger will not. Consequently, when we choose to “confide to strangers we are really speaking more to ourselves” (Bohannon, 1981, as cited in Shabatay, 1991, p. 143).

demands of the economy like beasts of labour in separate pens” (Biddulph, 2000, p. 6). Because they often fail to talk about issues that trouble them, men (and boys) are often not perceived as needy (Lerner, 2000, p. 127). Although some men may consider their silence to be virtuous (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, p. 122), Biddulph links isolation and failure to engage in emotional talk to the rates at which men die of suicide, and suffer from other societal ills, such as “alcoholism, divorce, poor health, crime and violence” (2000, p. 6).

²⁵ This may be particularly so for those from strict religious backgrounds, because even to think about committing a sinful act may be considered a sinful act in and of itself (Venning, 1669).

Once the process of self-disclosure is begun, feedback received from the listener affects the story that is told and how it is told, and informs us about whether it is safe to continue disclosing²⁷ (Jourard, 1979). If we see evidence that the listener signals disgust or horror, for example, our disclosure may cease, and we may decide that any further attempt to tell the story, to that person or another, will result in the rejection of our authentic self by the listener. Rejection, then, has the potential to inhibit further disclosure, and to reinforce a negative self-view. Although rejection is an inherent risk of self-disclosure,²⁸ there is the alternate possibility that the listener will provide positive feedback, the authentic self will be affirmed and accepted, and that a more accepting self-view will result. Consequently, the ongoing effort to repress the authentic self in the presence of the person to whom the disclosure has been made will no longer be required, and, based on this positive experience, it is possible for us to gain the confidence to disclose more of our authentic selves to others. As a result, we begin to decrease the gap between our public semblances and our authentic selves, with the result that we become increasingly more self-accepting. Moreover, if the repression of our authentic selves is detrimental to our well-being (Jourard, 1979; Kenyon & Randall, 1997), then open and honest self-acceptance must surely be cause for an optimistic outcome in this regard (Tucker-Ladd, 2000).

A number of researchers, particularly in the field of psychology (Pennebaker, 1997, 2000; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001; Rimé, 1995; J. M. Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999), are interested in the ways in which people form and express traumatic events as narratives. Pennebaker (2000) “discovered that when people put their emotional upheavals into words, their physical and mental health improved markedly” (p. 3). Health improvements are only noted, however, when the emotional experience is expressed in narrative form.²⁹

The process whereby emotions are discharged is known as catharsis (Heron, 1982). Sharing traumatic personal narratives can be an emotion-filled experience, but can also be cathartic. It is Heron’s view that “catharsis, when taken far enough, restructures awareness, liberates insight and re-evaluation about the genesis and

²⁶ Retelling to others (Christophe & Rimé, 1997; Curci & Bellelli, 2004).

²⁷ Thus self-disclosure conforms to the principles of operant behavior, and feedback acts as a reinforcer (either positive or negative) (Jourard, 1979).

²⁸ And when long-term friendships or relationships are at stake, this may be a significant risk (Bochner, 1984, as cited in Eisenberg, 2001).

²⁹ The creation of lists of words, for example, does not have the same affect.

consequences of the originating trauma” (p. 3).

In Western cultures, like the open expression of emotion itself, catharsis is not promoted (Heron, 1982). Yet, despite our cultural taboos, the narrative expression of events accompanied by deep emotion to a trusted other, or others, is a process which can bring about some relief to the story-teller (Fairbairn, 2002; McAdams & Bowman, 2001).³⁰ Mitchell, for example, reported that participants in a group of bereaved suicide survivors found that sharing their personal narratives was “the most powerful healing activity” they experienced during an 8-week group intervention (Mitchell, Gale, Garand, & Wesner, 2003, p. 96). Similarly, Tedeschi and Calhoun found that “survivors of illness and trauma often report increased self-reliance and broader self-understanding, enhanced self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness in relationships, and a changed philosophy of life” (1995, as cited in McAdams & Bowman, 2001, p. 26).

The stresses people experience due to their work in the caring professions can often be alleviated through storytelling with colleagues (Fairbairn, 2002). In a study of special education teachers, for example, Pullis found that “96% of teachers rated collaborating and talking with special education colleagues as one of their most effective strategies for coping with stress” (as cited in B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003, p. 10). It needs to be noted, however, that, while it is important for teachers to find people with whom they feel safe “to express their feelings and frustrations and recharge their emotional batteries,” there is a difference between the productive venting of emotion and the unproductive spiralling into negativity and complaining (B. G. Richardson & Shupe, 2003). Unproductive venting is a recognised sign of impending burnout (2003).

Storylistening

The “other half of the story” is that not only our own stories are useful to us, but there is also learning to be derived from the stories of others, if we take the time to listen. By listening to others’ stories we learn about their lives (Fairbairn, 2002). Furthermore, their stories can provide us with broader understandings of the human condition – “insights into human nature, revealing invaluable clues about the workings of the human mind, the normal course of development, interpersonal

³⁰ Although this is not always the case (Pennebaker et al., 2001; Seligman, 1994).

relationships, and the fine line between genius and lunacy” (McAdams, 1993, p. 310).

Through the acts of careful listening and opening ourselves to others’ emotions, we can increase our sensitivity to, and understanding of, the lives that they live (Fairbairn, 2002; Shabatay, 1991). Other people’s experiences of joy, terror, despair, trauma, disability, cultural difference, prejudice and death, for example, become available to us through their stories. The narrator’s emotion is able to influence listeners, and, indeed, may evoke an emotional response (Kirkwood, 2000). As we listen to others’ stories, it is possible for us to understand the depth of their feelings (Carter, 1999), identify with them as persons, and make connections between their experiences and dilemmas and our own (Hoover, 2002; Shabatay, 1991; Trzebiński, 2005).

However, such is the power of narrative that through hearing others’ stories we are also able to comprehend experiences we have not ourselves had (Carter, 1999). We can begin to imagine what it would be like if we were ever to find ourselves confronted with such an experience as that told by the narrator (Fairbairn, 2002; Shabatay, 1991). Indeed, “interacting with stories that are real, or true, before we encounter situations like them in the world can be a good way of ‘limbering up’ for the real thing” (Fairbairn, 2002, p. 23). Remembering others’ stories may also enable us to endure difficult physical and psychological situations. For example, Andy McNab,³¹ author of the best-selling war story *Bravo Two Zero*, when interviewed about surviving interrogation and torture in Iraq, recalled that the most valuable aspect of his training was hearing the story of an American Vietnam War veteran who had undergone interrogation and beatings in solitary confinement for 6 years (F. Kelly, 2006, May 11). Recalling this other soldier’s story during his own interrogation, gave McNab strength and hope for his own survival. Therefore, it is valuable to realise that recalling others’ stories can remind us that we are not alone in our times of suffering and need.

Our human capacity to be able to imagine ourselves in situations beyond our lived experience “is a helpful way of expanding the range of experiences on which we can each draw in the future” (Fairbairn, 2002, p. 30). Moreover, our imagination may lead us to empathise with the emotions that others feel (2002). Fairbairn defines empathy as:

³¹ A pen-name.

the attempt imaginatively to inhabit the other's world as that person, rather than the attempt to imagine one's own experiences – what one's perceptions and feelings would be, were one to find oneself in such a world. (p. 29)

He believes that “the ability to empathise is an indicator of our humanity” (2002, p. 28). While he posits that sympathy may possibly be “destructive of care” (p. 28), empathy is “a learned skill or attitude of being, which can be used in the attempt to relate to, communicate with and understand others, the situations in which they live and the experiences and feelings they have” (p. 29). Like everyone else, teachers and others in the caring professions are limited by their own lived experiences. Their ability, then, to imagine themselves in others' experiences, and, perhaps more importantly, to imagine from the perspective of the other, allows them to transcend their own experiential limitations (Weems, 2003).

When we understand others through their stories, we are less likely to judge or condemn them, but rather suspend judgement and become more accepting of them, and the differences that exist between us (Shabatay, 1991). Unsurprisingly perhaps, Dunn believes that “stories and the lives they are based on are clearly at the heart of adult development” (2003, p. 606). Through bearing witness to others' experiences via their narration, we are more able to feel our human connectedness, and, as a consequence, increase our “consciousness that we are all part of the wider universe” (Hoover, 2002, p. 80). In a world where, increasingly, we need to live and work closely together with people – “strangers by virtue of any difference: physical, psychological, social, cultural, religious, political, racial and personal” – who may have widely differing beliefs and values from our own, any attempt to increase our understanding, compassion, acceptance,³² and our connectedness with “the uniqueness of the other” is to be encouraged (Shabatay, 1991, pp. 136–137).

Summary

Story is an important source of the self, and a powerful medium through which we come to understand ourselves and others. It is through the telling and retelling of our self-making stories that we establish unique identities. The act of raising our stories to consciousness and interrogating them, then, allows us deeper insights into our selves. Listening to the stories of others allows us insights into how they have come to be, and provides us with access to experiences beyond the limitations of our own

³² As distinct from tolerance.

lives. Through story we can develop empathy for others, and come to understand the connectedness of human experience. The PD that MESH participants experience provides a rare, and somewhat unexpected, opportunity for teachers to share storied aspects of their lives within the relative safety of the support group context that forms part of the 3-day workshop. Consequently, an understanding of the role of story is crucial to this dissertation, which seeks to explore the lived experience and enduring outcomes for teacher participants in the 3-day MESH PD workshops.

Interlude

Please hear what I'm not saying¹

Don't be fooled by me.
Don't be fooled by the face I wear
for I wear a mask, a thousand masks,
masks that I'm afraid to take off,
and none of them is me.

Pretending is an art that's second nature with me,
but don't be fooled,
for God's sake don't be fooled.

I give you the impression that I'm secure,
that all is sunny and unruffled with me, within as well as without,
that confidence is my name and coolness my game,
that the water's calm and I'm in command
and that I need no one,
but don't believe me.

My surface may seem smooth but my surface is my mask,
ever-varying and ever-concealing.

Beneath lies no complacency.
Beneath lies confusion, and fear, and aloneness.
But I hide this. I don't want anybody to know it.
I panic at the thought of my weakness exposed.
That's why I frantically create a mask to hide behind,
a nonchalant sophisticated facade,
to help me pretend,
to shield me from the glance that knows.

But such a glance is precisely my salvation, my only hope,
and I know it.
That is, if it's followed by acceptance,

¹ This poem, written by Charles C. Finn (1966), is often read at the conclusion of the 3-day MESH workshops, as part of the closing ceremony. The poem has evolved into different versions and is also known by a number of titles including "Don't be fooled by me" and "The mask I wear."

if it's followed by love.
It's the only thing that can liberate me from myself,
from my own self-built prison walls,
from the barriers I so painstakingly erect.
It's the only thing that will assure me
of what I can't assure myself,
that I'm really worth something.
But I don't tell you this. I don't dare to, I'm afraid to.
I'm afraid your glance will not be followed by acceptance,
will not be followed by love.
I'm afraid you'll think less of me,
that you'll laugh, and your laugh would kill me.
I'm afraid that deep-down I'm nothing
and that you will see this and reject me.

So I play my game, my desperate pretending game,
with a facade of assurance without
and a trembling child within.
So begins the glittering but empty parade of masks,
and my life becomes a front.
I tell you everything that's really nothing,
and nothing of what's everything,
of what's crying within me.
So when I'm going through my routine
do not be fooled by what I'm saying.
Please listen carefully and try to hear what I'm not saying,
what I'd like to be able to say,
what for survival I need to say,
but what I can't say.

I don't like hiding.
I don't like playing superficial phoney games.
I want to stop playing them.
I want to be genuine and spontaneous and me
but you've got to help me.
You've got to hold out your hand
even when that's the last thing I seem to want.
Only you can wipe away from my eyes
the blank stare of the breathing dead.
Only you can call me into aliveness.

Each time you're kind, and gentle, and encouraging,
each time you try to understand because you really care,
my heart begins to grow wings –
very small wings,
very feeble wings,
but wings!

With your power to touch me into feeling
you can breathe life into me.
I want you to know that.
I want you to know how important you are to me,
how you can be a creator – an honest-to-God creator –
of the person that is me
if you choose to.
You alone can break down the wall behind which I tremble,
you alone can remove my mask,
you alone can release me from my shadow-world of panic,
from my lonely prison,
if you choose to.
Please choose to.

Do not pass me by.
It will not be easy for you.
A long conviction of worthlessness builds strong walls.
The nearer you approach to me
the blinder I may strike back.
It's irrational, but despite what the books say about man
often I am irrational.
I fight against the very thing I cry out for.
But I am told that love is stronger than strong walls
and in this lies my hope.
Please try to beat down those walls
with firm hands but with gentle hands
for a child is very sensitive.

Who am I, you may wonder?
I am someone you know very well.
For I am every man you meet
and I am every woman you meet.

by Charles C. Finn

Chapter 4

Kath Rivers

*“I am a more complex character
than the principal that you see”*

It was late in 2004, just as Spring had begun to spread across the landscape, when I first met Kath Rivers. Nairn Walker had initiated a gathering of people at the Mount Arthur Centre which is situated a short distance from my home on Brown Mountain, a rainforest-topped hillside on the rim of the Lilydale valley in Northern Tasmania. We were there to participate in what she had described to me as an “educational dreaming conversation.”

At first, I was intrigued that Nairn thought that I should be there. I soon discovered that we were there to listen to Kath and to help her brainstorm, verbalise and formulate a plan for further change at her school. That afternoon, as fine droplets of mist hung in the cool mountain air, we shared lunch and visions of how education could be at Oceanview High School.

Some days later, I was excited, and somewhat surprised, when, in response to my mailed invitations, Kath telephoned me to say that she’d be glad to participate in my study. I remember giving a great whoop of joy as I hung up the telephone – I had attracted my first participant to the study, and I was thrilled to have her support and involvement. Even more pleasing for me was that at our first meeting I’d found Kath to be someone to admire. She’d shown herself to be a straight-talker, as well as someone who wanted the best for her students, and the fact that she was keen to explore exactly what that might mean made her an appealing contributor to the study.



I’m always a bit nervous coming to a new school. The signposting on the roads to Oceanview has confused me and I’m running a few minutes late, which is something

that I hate. I eventually sort out in my mind which driveway belongs to the high school and find a space in the car park.

As I make my way to the office, I note the striking three-dimensional sculptured murals alluding to Neptune's undersea world which adorn the exterior walls of the building. The older of the two women in the office comes to the reception desk. I try hard to curb my urge to break into a grin at the sight of her bright purple hair. The Gatekeeper asks if I have an appointment and, after my reply, she directs me to wait outside Kath's office. Kath has been called away to Somewhere Else in the school, so I use this time to let my eyes wander around my surroundings.

Daylight from an overhead skylight reflects from coloured glass mobiles hanging from the ceiling above a raised indoor garden. Hand-painted wooden plaques, glossily polished fronts and rough bark backs, resemble tombstones around the garden's edge, and the artist's representational choice suggests to me an Aboriginal connection to the land on which the school is built, to the students, or to both.

High on the wall behind the garden is a charter signed by the year's senior cohort, committing themselves to "participate in the 'No Dole Project' which aims to place every 2004 Grade 10 student in further education, training or employment by 31st March 2005."

As I finish jotting down field notes, Kath arrives and welcomes me. She tells me that she'd kill for a cup of coffee and asks if I'd like a drink. At my "I'd love one, thanks," she whisks me away from the foyer and through the school. I feel rather like Alice in Wonderland chasing after the White Rabbit as we head through a series of passageways and out into one of the large, open plan classrooms. We almost manage to get past a group of laughing girls when one of them races up to Kath and grabs her by her arms, embracing her in a dance-hold and twirling her around the room: "You'll dance with me, won't you, Mrs R?" They spin wildly around, the girl's long, dark hair flying out behind her. After a few twirls, and giddy from the dance, Kath light-heartedly laughs to the group: *Somebody take this mad girl away!*

I reflect back on my own time in school, not recognising anything from those distant times in this interaction between a principal and her students. I marvel at how much school principals have changed in the 30 years since I left school at the end of Grade 10. Then I speculate that perhaps this has more to do with the differences between the two principals themselves than the time that separates them.



“I’ve been at school since I was 6”

Kath has been at school *forever*. *Forever*. I got a scholarship, a studentship with the Education Department when I was 17. So I’ve never left school. I’ve been at school since I was 6.

Although she always wanted to be a teacher, Kath has *no idea why*. *I’m the oldest child in my family. Mum went through to Year 10, I think. I think Dad left school in Grade 6. As young kids we were poor. My sister did a year of what would now be TAFE¹ secretarial, joined the Air Force and stayed there for 15 [years]. One of my brothers owns a service station, the other one’s a truckie, so I’m not from a middle class family.*

I was always going to be a home economics teacher. If they hadn’t had studentships, I wouldn’t have been able to go [to teachers’ college], because there wasn’t enough money. My parents never owned their own home or anything like that. So, there’s no way I would’ve gone, and it wouldn’t have been because they didn’t want me to. They just wouldn’t have had the money.

Kath has *taught a range of things, a bit of art, a bit of English, primary school*. *[When] this whole notion of middle schooling started, I became a middle school teacher, and never looked back really. I loved it! I was scared to death, ’cos, “I don’t know how to do this!”* Kath believes that these growth experiences were critical incidents. She was presented with *lots of other opportunities around leadership, and recognised that, you know, okay, I can do some of this stuff, and other people think I’m alright at it, and I’m really enjoying it*. Taking up the numerous opportunities that came her way led Kath to develop confidence in her abilities. *[I] had to learn to team teach, and learn how to be a grade leader, and then had to learn how to run a middle school in a large school of 1,100 students where the middle school was about, I think it was four classes in each grade, so it was big, like it was probably three hundred and sixty, seventy, something like that, kids.*

At 48, Kath no longer describes herself as a teacher, but as *an educator*. I laugh at what appears to me to be a reversal of power when she tells me that her teachers let her *go in front of the kids sometimes*. She explains to me that, although she likes *working with the kids*, that they all know her, and that she knows them – *most of their names and bits about them* – teaching is more than that. There is recognition by her of the complexity of the teacher’s role, and her articulation of the alternative part that she feels is hers to play in the life of the school:

¹ Technical and Further Education.

I don't know the kids well enough as learners. I don't work in a team with a group of other teachers for planning. I don't have time to plan properly for my classes and I don't have time to assess, so how could I call myself a teacher? I can teach them stuff at a superficial level and we can have a good time, but in terms of developing the really meaningful kind of learning sequences and stuff, nah! It's not my job so why would I call myself a teacher? But my job is to work with teachers to make them better at their job.

However Kath also sees her role as being there for the students. *They know where to come if they need me, and need help, so I think in terms of,* she draws a deep breath, *before starting again. The way that the kids see me, it's as a support and I'm on their side, and I try and work with them, but they also know that that's where the line is too. And I will do the hard thing if I need to.*

And the kids do indeed appear to know where to come when they need support. Kath operates an open door policy for students. In fact, her room is set up specifically as an inviting space to talk, with five lounge chairs set around a coffee table, in addition to the chair at her desk in the corner of the room. At times during my visits to Kath she was sitting down with either a delegation of students or an individual student – the international exchange student hoping to find a new host family – or we had students interrupt us with their adolescent, but very real, anxieties – the teenage girls fretful about a friend with body image issues who has locked herself in one of the girls' toilets. I observed Kath respectfully listening to their concerns, asking them for their contributions to resolutions, and assuring them that their confidences remain safe with her.



“Degrees of separation” from “the main game”

Oceanview High School is Kath's second principalship. When I first spoke with her, she was in her third year at the school. *My first year here I thought I'd walked into a bomb zone; it was just horrific. It was full of the most disengaged, disenfranchised, sour...*

In my mind, I anticipate that Kath is going to say “students,” but she continues uninterrupted, surprising me.

... teachers that you'd ever meet in your life. And the kids were running the joint in an aggressive way. They didn't care about it. It was graffiti and rubbish everywhere and nobody cared about the place. And I thought, “My God, what am I gonna do?” And they didn't care about me either!

“Well,” I thought, “that’s hurtful!” So, anyway, I decided that I needed a critical friend and that’s how it started.

Kath describes to me how she spoke to a former colleague about her concerns. Her friend had been principal at Brooks High School where Nairn had run Birribi,² and he suggested that Kath speak to Nairn. From this initial introduction, Kath found that Nairn *became like a friend*. She was somebody that Kath could talk to in order to help her *to articulate the way that I was feeling about the problems that I was having at the school.*

So, it grew out of that, and Nairn worked with us in a range of ways around trying to help the staff build up stronger relationships with the kids. So they all started to trust her, and value her advice. So I was pretty happy with that.

Then, about 6 weeks prior to my first interview with Kath, the germ of an idea started to fester – thoughts about what might be missing from her plans for Oceanview High. This prompted her to have another chat with Nairn. This conversation resulted in the gathering at the Mount Arthur Centre, where I’d first met Kath. Nairn had thought that the group of people she’d invited to attend might be able to help Kath *focus* and *hone* her ideas for change.

We started talking about what I wanted to do, and I had all these concerns because of all this [state education departmental structure] reorganisation and my concern about it is that, I mean education’s got some really, really clear, “big picture” things that you need to get right for it to work, you know, around curriculum, and your relationships and stuff like that, but all of this stuff’s being measured, and if you can’t measure it you can’t do it kind of thing. And I said to Nairn, “But I know, I know that what the teachers need is to be able to relate better to the kids, because then when you make mistakes around your pedagogy, or whatever, it doesn’t matter because the relationships are strong.”

This time, I do interject. “And they’ll forgive you.”

Exactly, ’cos they care. And it’s become more critical because of the structures that we’ve got in the school because the teachers are now required to work in teams and, warts and all, things are a million percent better than they were, but they need more, different skills to be effective team members than they needed when they were the, she pauses for a moment, artisan in their own little classroom. It’s just a different environment.

I tell Kath that during our meeting at the Mount Arthur Centre I had sensed that she

² The off-campus program, which was designed to engage students at risk of educational failure.

was disillusioned in some way. She agrees with my perception.

I'm disillusioned with the system. Totally disillusioned with the system, because of this notion that it's about accountability and [that], somehow, if you restructure all of this stuff and make it accountable it's gonna [improve student learning outcomes]. It's not at all, and so I feel like it's degrees of separation, and I'm separating more, because as I'm getting older, I'm thinking that the amount of value that people give to the skills around building strong teaching and learning relationships is diminishing, and the amount of value that's being given to the structures and the curriculum and passing this test and being allowed to do this, this and this is growing, and that, to me, should be the other way around, and then you'd know you had a good system.

“There’s a conflict there?”

There's a real conflict for me at the moment, yeah. And so, I guess, the project [of school improvement] that I've got happening is an attempt to kind of make that right for my own set of values, I think, that I know to be true as a teacher. [Improvements to their education] that I know these kids, in a public system, should have, for all sorts of really good reasons.

“So you think that the friendships, and the relationships, and the growth of self are important?” I build on the point made by Kath earlier.

If your purpose, as an educator, is to help kids to be the best that they can be, then all that stuff around relationships and helping them to know themselves, and valuing their differences, and all that kind of gear has to be the main game, and it simply isn't [within the current system], so that's the frustration, yeah. And in terms of my growth as an individual, probably even 5 years ago I wouldn't have been able to name that up as clearly, so at least the turmoil that I've been struggling with because of all this [departmental restructuring and curriculum] change that's been going on now has at least enabled me to be really clear about that. REALLY clear about it, yeah.



“MESH will maybe open up some thinking perhaps”

In their preliminary discussions about how some of Kath’s broader ideas for change might be realised at Oceanview, Nairn had suggested to Kath that the MESH program might offer a valuable contribution both to Kath and her school staff. Kath was open to ideas that might improve her school, and willing to explore the idea of running a whole-staff MESH PD workshop at the school, as one of a range of

strategies³ that she was keen to implement to achieve her goals.

Kath was aware that a couple of members of her staff had undertaken MESH training in the past, and that they were already working with students at Oceanview using the skills that they had developed during the 3-day workshop. Another staff member, Kym Oliver,⁴ had already registered to attend an upcoming MESH training. Following our discussions at the Mount Arthur Centre, Kath had decided that: *I'm just going to tag along [to the MESH training workshop] with Kym, which will be great.* Tagging along with Kym would allow Kath to assess whether the MESH program, delivered as a whole-staff PD, would fit with her ideas for change.

In her initial thinking, there were two elements Kath was hoping the PD might address. *One's the personal element which is the impact that some of the [management] issues have on me, and better ways to deal with them, and so I'm really kind of thinking that if I get something like that for myself that'd be a bonus. The other thing is that I spend so much time dealing with things that crop up because of stuff that I think doesn't belong in the professional arena, however it impacts, and it happens time and time again, and the same people are the ones that keep causing the most grief for others. They've got a whole range of strategies for avoiding their own responsibilities or for [avoiding] having a good hard look at themselves. It's a deficit way of looking at things and they try and divert attention away from themselves and blame outside influences and it all blocks them from being able to have those relationships with the kids.*

A teacher at Oceanview comes to her mind, and Kath uses him as an example to illustrate her meaning. *There's one guy who's deaf. He must be close to 60. He feels he's got to stay at teaching because of where his own kids are at – he's still putting them through education. But he doesn't have skills for working with others very well, or for relating to the kids, so he'll be a buddy-boy one minute and then it goes from that to whack!* she claps her hands together loudly, *yelling and shouting. And there's no middle ground there. He's had some Vietnam [War] experience and I believe that underneath all of that there's, she pauses to find the right word, resentment, that he's having to work, and it's HARD for him. I think he probably feels inadequate, because I think he sees himself as competent in his area of specialisation, but in fact if you go in there [and observe his teaching] he's not real good there either. Same thing happens. And so all of those things: the lack of skills, and the way he feels about himself, and I think that, you know, he needs to be able to reflect in an appropriate way and be able to make some choices that*

³ For example, Kath was also planning to work with the school management team on a school vision-building process.

⁴ See Kym Oliver's narrative account, p. 127.

might suit him, and if he thought, "Oh maybe sometimes I'm a bit judgmental" or "Maybe sometimes..."

And I can have that conversation with 'im a million times, but it doesn't work. And we keep having the same [conversation], and he'll be alright for a while, and then there'll be another flare up, and then he'll be right for a while, and then...

I can sense Kath's frustration at the repetitiveness of the interactions required of her in trying to overcome this teacher's way of being in the classroom. "It must be tiring for you, that constancy."

That's the job. You know, that's the job, and so, I don't mind working with the teachers in that way, 'cos I think the main thing I'm paid to do is to try and get the teachers to teach better. Really simplistically. All of this other stuff gets in the way of that, 'cos it takes out of your time, but when people have deeply embedded values, or deeply embedded issues or problems...

"Or fears?"

... all of those things, then they need a different process to start to be able to recognise them, and work through them.

Another thing that I maybe will open up [about] in MESH is [that] it takes a lot from me personally in dealing with performance management of staff, because it doesn't come easy. The process doesn't come easy to me, and I have to do this HUGE battle with myself all the time about, "Have I done the right thing?" So, I'm really hard on myself, and finding a way to process that more quickly would be a real advantage to me, 'cos even if I have had an incident with a teacher, and I've worked it through, and I'm sure that the decisions that I made were right, I still sweat on that for a long time.

"Stew it over in your mind?" I say, aware that I tend to do this myself.

Shockin', shockin', shockin'. But, to no advantage.

"Because you've already thought it through and you've made the decision that you think is the right one?"

Yeah, yeah.

"But, it's hard to live with that decision?" I guess.

No, hard to let go because I know that it's not positive. It's not easy for that teacher. And it always has been hard for me, that stuff. And I'm really clear that it's because I'm putting the kids first, and the way that I view it is, "Yep, they're kids, they're entitled to another go, and another go, and

another go, and they can muck up, and muck up, and muck up.”

“And you try not to give up on them.”

And we don't give up on them, “And you're the adults, and yep, you've got baggage, HOWEVER the kids still come first.” So, it's when there's that collision, then that's what I struggle with. It doesn't mean I don't do it, but it's, yeah, there's a personal cost there.

“And that baggage you're talking about, you obviously see teachers as having baggage?”

Hence the MESH. To help them to help themselves, hopefully.

So, hopefully, some of the stuff that's in MESH will maybe open up some thinking perhaps. We'll see. But, you know, suck it and see. Mm. It won't hurt, that's for sure. But I'm hoping that this will provide a process where a whole range of things might come out of it, just because of the people having the experience.

◆◆◆ First MESH experience ◆◆◆

As we talk after her first MESH experience, Kath recognises that how she interacts with staff and, particularly, students, *it's not a normal principal behaviour. I know that, she laughs. I recognise that. But that's okay. I'm happy with that, and it's my principalship and I do own that way of behaving, and one of the things that happened out of the MESH program for me was that it made me reflect that, yeah, I do own that stuff and that is how I work and it is successful for me in my view, so I'm happy with that, whereas sometimes before I used to think, “Oh, maybe that isn't quite the right way, and maybe I should be more formal and ra-ra-ra-ra-ra,” and that was a little tension, but it's not any more, so that's good.*

Kath attributes her difference as a principal to her background. *I reckon that's related to my, ah, not coming from a middle class family. A lot. A lot of it, I reckon, and some other stuff, too. I was a first child.*

Kath comes from a similar background to many of her schools' students. *I reckon I've got heaps more in tune with them. Some of them [the staff] hear the [students'] issues and think, “Yes, and that's sad,” or that's whatever it is, so they can empathise to that extent, but THEN, “And here's what we're learning today!”*

Clearly, it's Kath understanding that social issues impact on students' learning processes. She believes that her teachers often fail to understand the significance of these issues, and, therefore, they continue to give priority to the planned content of

the curriculum. Her teachers don't seem to appreciate the connection between teacher-student relationships and student engagement.



“What I think teachers don't get taught”

One of Kath's initial reasons for investigating MESH as a PD opportunity for her staff was her concern that teacher education courses lacks content she feels to be necessary to effective teaching. *When you learn to be a teacher, you learn a set of processes and it's underpinned with some learning about how kids develop, and how we learn, but what isn't there is about, “Well, these are some of the personal kind of skills that you need to bring to the job and that you need to work on and develop in yourself.” And there's none of that there. “What are your values?” and even some kind of compatibility with the work. You see young people come into teaching and you think, “No, you're not the right person,” less now than [in the past], but, “Why are you being a teacher?” You know, “Why are you?” So people come and say to me now, “I'm gonna be a PE ⁵ teacher.” I say “No-o, you're gonna teach kids. Now you might do some phys ed training. [But] don't ever think you're gonna be a PE teacher, though, 'cos that's not how it works.”*

“You're a teacher of children.”

And they don't see that. Don't see it.

What I think teachers don't get taught is skills about how to know yourself well, and I think that you have to be able to do that before you can get to know kids well and develop appropriate relationships with them, so that you can do your job properly.

Because she sees teachers as lacking some fundamental interpersonal relationship skills, Kath says that she *quite often* has to *teach the kids to manage the teachers' weaknesses*.

“So that's one-on-one when they come in and talk to you, you give them strategies?”

Yes, yes. Strategies to manage the teachers.

“Depending on whom that is.”

Yeah, that's exactly right! That's how it is, and I wouldn't want you to think that was a bad [thing], 'cos it's not. And I'm not talking about teachers that I performance manage, it's just recognising that that's how it is for most kids in most schools, that there are some teachers...

⁵ Physical education.

“Well, for people in life.”

Exactly. That’s the way it is.

“You need to learn how to deal with different people.”



Kath was keen to improve the interpersonal relationships at the school; the teacher-student relationships as well as the collegial relationships. Even prior to her first MESH experience, she was thinking forward to the whole-staff MESH program she had contemplated. *I’m hoping that I’ve got something there that provides a platform for all my staff in terms of a professional learning that gives them a way of thinking about themselves, and thinking about others, that will help to grow the relationships in the school.* She is hoping, too, *that by listening, even if they don’t contribute anything, just by being there and listening, they see some ways that they might learn a little bit about themselves and be able to work with kids in a different way.*

Kath wants the members of her staff to develop the ability to reflect on the appropriateness of their beliefs about and expectations of students. Probably representative of the majority of schools in Australia, Kath says that *a significant proportion of the staff are kind of middle aged,⁶ middle class people. And so looking at where these kids are coming from is kind of an “Oh well, that’s how they are. That’s their problem.” “However,”* their thinking as far as the kids are concerned is, *“you WILL learn algebra.”*

Kath’s belief that this type of thinking is problematic and unhelpful has led her to look for a means of connecting her teachers with the daily realities of the lives of their students. She hopes that a whole-staff MESH PD will provide just such an opportunity. Kath is aware, however, that her students interact with a number of people performing a variety of roles within the school. Consequently, her vision for school staff development is an inclusive one. *I mean the office staff and the cleaners and the whole lot. Just do it. The whole school PD. And I don’t know if this bit works or not either, but not necessarily with the view to them running support groups. But those people [who do want to run support groups] will identify themselves ’cos having done the training I expect that they [some of them] will want to run support groups.*

◆◆◆ First MESH experience ◆◆◆

⁶ The average age of all teachers in Tasmania, for example, is 44.8 years with a median age of 46.5 years: “50% of all registered teachers in Tasmania are at least 46.5 years old” (Teachers Registration Board, 2005, p. 14).

After her first MESH experience, however, Kath began to refocus her thinking a little. *Emotional intelligences, that's the key to it. So, when I talk about relationships, it's probably wrong actually. I haven't thought about that. It's probably REALLY, the core of it's about emotional intelligence, and if the teacher doesn't have emotional intelligence capacities then maybe they shouldn't be a teacher.*

“So, those personal intelligences, like knowing yourself, and being able to read other people, and knowing what they need, and all that sort of stuff.”

Yeah, and being able to be empathic and being able to think creatively and being able to be innovative and flexible...

“And resilient?”

... all of that stuff, then maybe that's the core of stuff that when you're growing teachers that if they haven't got [it], that core of stuff needs to be the core of their learning, too, at university. And maybe, if they're not strong in that way, they should be encouraged to maybe shoot off in a different direction.

“You obviously see the development of the person, or the person developing themselves, or understanding themselves better as key to what goes on in the classroom.”

Absolutely. People aren't encouraged to be reflective, personally reflective, and I THINK that teaching's a craft and there are some differences about a craft, aren't there, than a job, and a craft requires you to create things, and if you're going to create things, don't you have to be really aware of your own abilities? And the things that you need to learn? It's like any other kind of craft, you know, you can't be a good cook unless you have a whole heap of understandings. Then you bring into it your own style, your own particular bent, so I do it this way 'cos that suits me. It doesn't mean that it's the only right way, but I KNOW that it's the best way for me, and it will still end up looking good. Yeah?

“Yeah,” I laugh. “Tasting good,” I hark back to Kath's cooking analogy.

They're all elements of a craft and I think that teachers are natural craftsmen, in the main, I think that's one of the things about them, and I think they're also, they tend to be conservative. A lot of them tend to be a bit introverted. But then they all carry all that baggage, and so trying to draw out of them, help them to get to know their own essence as a craftsman, then that might help them to apply their craft better. Which is kind of not really a good way of describing things in terms of accountability, and THAT's the frustration that you saw when you first met me, because it's so far removed from what's happening at a systemic level in lots of ways, which I'm concerned is trying to

turn itself into a one-size-fits-all, so we'll [the state education department will] give these clusters these responsibilities and this power, but then we're gonna test this, this, this, this and this. So the bow, which is the craftsmanship, I'm concerned that'll get lost. And the bow, is the relationship stuff. The emotional intelligence stuff, yeah, so that's why I think it's important.



Drawing on her first MESH experience, Kath is more able to identify potential outcomes of the whole-staff MESH PD she has booked. *I believe it [MESH] will give the teachers a process to (a) have a good 'ard look at 'emselves, but (b) be effective in working with kids in a way that's not adversarial, that demonstrates – clearly – care, that provides on-going support through the range of issues, so that if you're in trouble here's something that's available for you, and here's something else again later on for you. And there'll be something else, and it's just a part of the way that we work.*

And that it also might help teachers to feel better about their work, because they won't feel, um, alienated from the kids, they'll be able to be more with the kids, and with the families and understand that when that mother comes in and abuses that teacher, they're not really abusing the teacher, it's a cry for help, but they haven't got the language to describe that properly. So that it can be more of a shared journey, and that this notion around accountability, accountability, accountability, isn't gonna take over from the blanket that lies underneath all of that stuff.

“The care and concern, and ...”

Yeah, yeah, and the developing good relationships, and they still can be appropriate student-teacher relationships, but, she pauses, it's really simple stuff, too, like I give the kids a cuddle ALL the time, and it just comes naturally. It doesn't matter whether they're boys or girls, or Grade 7 or Grade 10, you know, there are just times, or a pat on the shoulder, and everybody should be able to do that. But they can't.

Although I can well understand the reasons underlying concerns about physical contact between teachers and students within schools, “It scares me that we can't.” So many children today lack any form of physical connection or affection.

And it's a really good symbol about what's wrong. I think that this way of working, maybe it doesn't mean everybody give the kid a cuddle but at least it allows them to be close, to be with kids when they need somebody to be with them. So, out of that, if you want to be accountable would be, I guess, um, less staff stress, less staff absenteeism, less student absenteeism, um, greater student satisfaction with the school, greater parent satisfaction with the school, and out of all of that you'd

expect improved learning outcomes.

“So you can see that as a possibility?”

Yeah.



“They’re at school for a different set of reasons”

I think, as a group, young people these days are conservative. I think there’s a fear there that wasn’t there when I was a young person, like fear for the future. This kind of empowerment, you know, that “I’m 6-foot tall and bullet-proof” – they’re not like that any more. And they take risks in different ways than we would have, and I think they think about themselves in different ways than we did when I was their age. I think they’re much more sophisticated thinkers at a younger age, so things like, um, ah, relationships. For example, yesterday, we had a group of about eight Grade 10 boys and they just get down there in a big group, but they do the bully-boy thing and you hear a bit of [“bad”] language and they’re just yahooing down there, so, a few weeks ago I told them that, you know, some of the behaviour wasn’t real flash, and yesterday I had a complaint from a couple of girls, and so I thought, “Right. Time to blast them.” So the AP⁷ and I got them in the room and we let them have it. “These are the behaviours that you’re not doing. You’re not allowed to hang out there and du-du-dub.” One of them stayed behind and he said, “I feel as though I’m being picked on and so is Brendan,” and somebody else he named, the three of them, he said, “because all of us have had brothers here that all got into trouble all the time, and mud sticks, and I don’t think that’s fair.” And I thought, “Isn’t that interesting.” Like he’s only 16, and I said, “That’s not actually true, because I don’t know any of your brothers, but I do know you, and I like you, but what I’m talking about are the behaviours that’re happening down there, so let’s be real,” and listed them again and we talked about it again. At 16 I’d never have thought that way. Not in a pink fit.

At [that age], that stuff just wouldn’t have occurred to me, it just didn’t, and yet you keep hearing little gems like that with these kids, and it makes me think that, all this media, like the world that they live in is so much more complex and so much more sophisticated, and it adds a whole heap of understandings and pressures, so it’s good and bad, that we never had, that I never had ever dealt with as a young person and so that the way that you work with them’s gotta be different too.

The other thing that was bothering me is that there’s still that group of kids who are about a quarter to a third of the population [within the school], I reckon, who are not really engaged, who don’t really achieve much, and just drift along. Nobody really knows them, they don’t cause a lot of

⁷ Assistant Principal.

trouble, you have the occasional “spot fire,” but they’re not the high needs ones, they sit above that.

“You know that they’re there, but they’re not so obvious?”

Yes. They’ve got some learning issues, and to me, nine times out of ten when there’s a flare-up you start to get underneath and you realise that why these kids are like that is that they’re at school for a different set of reasons, which is about time out, safety, relationships with their peers, because life outside of school is not so hot.

“So, school is a safe place.”

Yeah!

“Or, relatively.”

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, then they need a different kind of curriculum, they need different relationships with their teachers.

◆◆◆ First MESH experience ◆◆◆

Kath’s first MESH experience moves her thinking even further. *So, I guess from where I started in the first conversation with Nairn, [to] where it’s grown to now, is rather than trying to find something for the group of kids that I was worried about who weren’t necessarily acting out, but I knew were disengaged, um, I’ve turned my thinking around to saying, “Well, we can do something that’s going to be better for ALL the kids, that also might impact on what we do for that group, but will have a bigger kind of effect across the school.”*

The other thing that I’m hoping it will do is it will help teachers to feel that programs like the automotive program and the program that we run up at Mossvale, which the kids do stuff like they build chook houses.⁸ [It might] stop them seeing those as add-ons and see that they’re really kind of critical components.

“I noticed in the staffroom that you were talking about teachers not being allowed to withdraw students from those programs when they’ve mucked up in class. You obviously have teachers wanting to do that?”

There was a little boy in Grade 7 who goes to automotive, and a kid can access automotive for one afternoon a week, and it’s a pilot program for this term between us and the police department. So the local copper⁹ comes up and runs it, ’cos he’s a petrol head, and he likes to work, and so the police are actually making a significant contribution, ’cos that’s part of his work. I’m really hopeful that it’ll

⁸ “Chook” is Australian slang for “chicken.” Chook houses are chicken coops.

⁹ Police officer.

lead to a partnership for next year, and I might have to make a contribution, a financial one, to that, so I put some money aside, 'cos it's just working in spades, and the spin-offs! Like I have kids that will have regular time out of class during the week, but they don't miss automotive, and it's the same with the Mossvale Program, I've got kids who won't rock up for other days but they won't miss going to Mossvale [school farm], and both of those have got men running them, they're small group stuff.

“Physical hands-on sort of stuff.”

Hands-on stuff and highly structured, you know, and it's lock-step stuff. We do this and we do this and we do this, and there are opportunities for lots of chat to go on at the same time.

“And it's real world stuff, isn't it?”

Oh, yeah. And, like the Chook House, the kids that built that, they're still going up there and they're starting the Pig Palace soon.

I laugh at the incongruity of the name that the project has earned for itself.

Kath exhales. *Rotary paid for the building materials, so there's a link there to a community. And the Mossvale kids have got the chooks, they've got the eggs, they breed the chickens, so there's another link to that community. The kids [working in the project] see the little kids lookin' after 'em [the chickens] so there's that sense of “Oh, I did that!” you know, “for those little kids.”*

“So, pride.”

Some self-esteem. And with the automotive, there's a project called, I think it's called Right Turn, which is another kind of a community group that actually does a project with young people, disadvantaged young people. And the prize will be the car that these guys have done up. So they get to give as well. Yeah, and they're really happy about that.

“And, there are some good opportunities there with the community links.”

Multiple opportunities, for stuff that's really hard to MEASURE.

“Yeah, again!”

AGAIN! And, and it's the stuff that, like I'd just build program after program like that if I could 'cos I know, I KNOW that um...

“It's valuable.”

It's REALLY valuable. And it might be valuable for those kids a long time after they leave here.

“Great for the police, too, to have those relationships with the kids. It works both

ways.”

Oh! Yeah. That's right. And when he comes up here, Frank comes up in his police overalls, not his uniform, and, so he hangs out with the kids and just talks to them, and a lot of those kids we've SELECTED through our support teacher, like our MARSSS program. She selected the kids that're in there and they're a real mixed bag, so they're not all like kids that're destined to be in trouble, but [pause] there are some who have been in strife with the police, some who we're concerned about because they're disengaged at a really young age. Like this little fella in Grade 7 was the one that they were saying, "Well he won't be able to go to automotive if he's gonna do that." But he's not a problem, he's just, won't, he's just not with us, so phen, don't know. Um, there are kids there who we're concerned about 'cos they're leaving us next year, and we're worried that without the school structure and support behind 'em they'll get lost, so we're tryin' to help them find a way forward. [And, there are] girls in there, to try and break down the gender stuff. And girls who've said, "I'd really like to learn about cars, but I'm embarrassed 'cos I don't know anything." So they're in there too.

[Our support teacher's] put that [program] together for me, and she manages it. And that's why I said, "Nobody goes out of those programs unless she says so, or the police say it," because the relationships between the kids and those two are really critical. Yeah, yeah.

“Yeah. It amazes me that some people don't see how important that is. It just strikes me that, um ...”

I don't know. I don't.

“Teachers that want to take the kids out of these programs don't get the message somehow.”

That's why they need to do MESH. See, because that's the stuff that I come up against. Every day.



“Probably the single, BIGGEST critical incident that I've had”

Kath talked about her time on Bird Island, during what had been her first appointment as principal. At the time of her appointment, she was an acting assistant principal elsewhere. *I applied for six jobs*, she says. *Five of them were AP jobs and one was the principal of Bird Island. And I got that!* The appointment was to a much smaller school than the one she'd been working in at the time, and so she hadn't been too daunted by the promotion and move, *because I didn't know what I didn't know*. She laughs.

“Ignorance is bliss?” I laugh with her.

Kath describes how she had visited the school on the island, and had thought, *I can do that!* She laughs now, though, at the memory of her rude awakening *two weeks before the kids would start [school]. [I] walked over the hill, down towards the school, and the groundsman spotted me coming. So, “Are you the new principal?” No! she pulls herself up, laughing at the memory. “New headmistress?” They all call you headmistress over there. “Yeab,” she’d answered him. “Good! I’ve been waitin’ for you to come. The swimmin’ pool’s got a leak and we think the stormwater drain underneath the primary school’s collapsed!” And that was the start of that job! Thanks, yeab!*



As part of the life-history approach I engage in during interviews, I ask Kath about turning points in her life; events that she considers have altered her career path or her image of herself as a teacher. Without hesitation, she responds with a personal story.

My ex was a really needy person, like really needy, and I knew he was. He was an addictive personality, and he had that problem before I met him. But in terms of growing up and growing strong, that relationship really did that for me, because I was it – like I was mum and dad, the housekeeper, cleaner, the whole thing for all of them. And in terms of having to make tough decisions, and make really sure that they’re based on good reasons, there is nothing that’ll do that like deciding that you’re going to leave a marriage. Especially when the person is nice, but the behaviour’s unacceptable.

He had a couple of stints in psychiatric institutions and stuff like that, and I recognised that this isn’t something, because, I mean, when you’re young you can fix the world, you know.

“You can take on anything, can’t you?” I readily recall the idealistic optimism of my own youth.

Oh, yeab! And I realised that, “Oh, this is something that I actually can’t resolve.” And so, when I had the boys, and he had a bout of, ’cos what happens with addictive kind of people I think is that whatever their addiction is, it’s usually a mish-mash of stuff.

“They tend to have addictive personalities,” I recall what I’ve learnt at MESH and from my subsequent reading on addiction.

They hit that, Kath pauses momentarily, searching for the right word, line, and they don’t have control, and he did. Like I went into hospital and he went on a bender. As so I came home.

“A drinking bender?”

Drinking, and pills, and because he would be on medication from the doctor anyway, and that'd be a few things like Beta Blockers and Valium you know, a real bloody cocktail. And so then he'd go and get himself well and truly liquored up. Well, they're interesting all together, my word. She gives an ironic laugh.

And it [the combination of alcohol and other drugs] causes personality stuff that you don't see otherwise, and because it's so "out there" it takes you a fair while to realise, 'cos they're very cunning at covering all that stuff up, and so you don't know until it's really bad. And I'm talking about a long time now, probably in total, I don't know, 17 or 18 years, something like that, so a fairly long time, and a gradual worsening.

“And gradual realisation by you, I suppose?”

That this was bad and it wasn't getting any better. That it was really accelerating. And then when Mitch, who's now 16, was born and he went on a good big bender, at that time I thought, "If he ever does anything that puts these kids in danger, that's the line."

““That's the line he can't cross with me,' sort of thing?” I check my interpretation.

Yeah, yeah. And it was. And lots of horrible things happened, and there were some good times too. But it was hard, and then, at the end of that first year on Bird Island he did [cross the line]. On Bird Island, during the summer holidays. And so there was another critical time. I had to decide. I had to tell him to go. Well, he was endangering the kids. Our future. Himself. And he was doing it in an environment which is like a fishbowl.

“Everyone's looking on.” I can well imagine how difficult the situation must have been for Kath, a first-time principal, living in such a small, insular community.

Absolutely, absolutely. But the actual incident, it was a critical incident that made the change. He came home. He was having lots of medication that I didn't know about. There was alcohol which I didn't know about. He'd been away down in the clinic, down at Hobart, and he came home. He got off the plane and I thought, "Oh my God, he's drunk!" And he was. He was waving around in the breeze, and I just [thought], "Oh, this is not good." And that started a week that I've never seen the likes of. He was psychotic. He was clean off his head. I've never seen him so bad, and, during that time I had to do some pretty ordinary things, like hiding medication, hiding mouthwash, hiding, you know, da-da-da. And I said to him, "Look, just chill," 'cos I knew that day he was sober. What I still didn't have a handle on was what was going on with the medication. I'd hidden it. I was dishing it out according to the instructions, but he was still odd. I didn't know what it was, and

I didn't know how to get help. I thought, "Well give it a bit of time, and maybe it's just kind of cleansing."

"And being remote on an island like that would be difficult."

Well, what can you do, you know? Anyway, and partly if you get involved with people, like doctors can be hard like that anyway, but psychiatrists are really bad, they won't talk to you. They won't tell you anything. It doesn't matter if you're a partner, they're not interested, and "That's your problem, but he's my patient, you're not, and no, I can't divulge." So, I'm like, "Look here, I've got this person here who's not right. What do I do?"

"I'm sorry, you're not my patient." I pre-empt the doctor's response to Kath.

Nub! Nub! Nothing. Yeah, so anyway.

"You made the decision to ask him to leave," I return the conversation to Kath's earlier point.

Yep. Because he took the kids in the car with a half bottle of vodka, and they came back with an empty bottle of vodka. And they walked in the door, and I was at work 'cos it was close to the start of a new school year, and the older one came over, and he was just about to start Grade 7, and he said, "Oh Mum, I was a bit scared on the way home." And I said, "Why, Love?" He said, "Oh, Dad nearly crashed the car a few times." That was the line. Right there. That was the line. Yeah.

"Endangering their lives."

Yep, yep, absolutely. 'Cos that made me realise that he was SO, like...

"That they were at risk and he couldn't even see what he was doing."

Nub, nub, no. So that was it! So that's probably, that's pretty huge, probably the single, BIGGEST critical incident that I've had, I reckon, mm.

And so, when I say to you, "Oh well, if there's a few warts and things [that come out at MESH]," I really don't mind.

This experience occurred toward the end of Kath's first year on Bird Island, where she describes the locals as *really conservative, REALLY conservative*. Despite the ordeals of that first personally-difficult year, she remained as principal of the school for a further 4 years before taking up her position at Oceanview.



Kath's two sons maintain some contact with their father, *'cos they're still entitled to a*

Dad. He's had lots of medical issues because of his [diabetes] problems, some nasty things, like he had a leg amputated and stuff like that. They've had to deal with some of those things, BUT I'm safe and I'm strong. And he's weak, but he loves them, and they know that. And they go and visit in the holidays. And they know the issues. The older one has said, and this only happened early this year actually, "Don't come near me when you're drinking, Dad. I'm not interested. Don't ring me up. I don't want to know about it. If you want me to spend time with you, you get off the grog while I'm here." And I was really proud of him for that.

"That's really good, isn't it? That's setting limits."

Oh, phwoof! Absolutely! And it's setting that relationship in a way that he can handle it. He said to him, "It is your choice, Dad, but you need to know, I HATE it when you're drinking."

So, in terms of, when you make a big decision like that, you never know whether you've done the right thing or not, but in terms of thinking, well, yeah, okay, that's pretty good. I'm happy with that as an outcome.

Kath KNEW that her decision to ask her husband to leave could have had a major impact on their sons. *And that's why I was so scared.* Kath has, however, been committed to bringing up the boys, and describes herself in ways which lead me to understand that she is very capable and self-sufficient, and a good example to them – *I chop the wood, I mow the lawn. It's not a boy thing, it's just whoever. It's something that needs to be done. And I've taught them to like some of the things that I like, you know, like I took 'em out, taught them how to snorkel for abalone. It's right to give them interests outside of their home that're kind of healthy.* But she has been aware too that, without their Dad around, the house could turn into a *male-free zone*. *I asked, especially one of my brothers, to play a role, and at that stage my Dad was still alive.* According to Kath, her brother is *a lovely guy, but as rough as a truckie's guts*. However, he has been serious in his devotion to the boys. *And they've learnt a lot of stuff from him.*



"There's good learning for everybody in that"

In the interview prior to her first group experience, Kath expresses the view that everyone can benefit from work on the self and that this aspect of the MESH workshop doesn't concern her. *If I have to "reveal my undies" at this meeting it's not going to worry me that much,* is how she puts it to me. *But it doesn't frighten me. That stuff doesn't frighten me. And then that's only part of growth, isn't it, in terms of the journey that you make, the*

person I am now wasn't the person I was 10 years ago. The more "cock-ups" you make [in life], the less it worries you the next [time you make] one.

Given our conversation, I am somewhat surprised when early on Day 1, during the introductory group session, Kath sits back as other group members "volunteer" to run the six groups which participants co-facilitate with each other. I gain the impression that she is not comfortable with the idea of running a group.



It's Day 2. The vertical blinds flutter in the breeze and sunlight plays patterns on the walls of one of the rooms in the disused school building where the MESH training is taking place. We've eaten a delicious hot lunch prepared by the middle school food studies students from the newer, replacement school next door, and, now that it's mid-afternoon, my attention is flagging. As always, these are long days. Through the open windows, I hear a mower start. Its sound drones on into the warm September afternoon, the sweet smell of newly-cut grass reaches my nose, and I wish we weren't required to sit inside for so long on such a beautiful day.

Eventually, the workshop is over for the day and most of the other workshop participants leave. I sit down to prepare the co-facilitators of the Friday morning group who have stayed behind. Kath is one of the three. For the other two women, it's their second turn at co-facilitating a group and they seem reasonably confident in their role. I'm aware that all three women are now familiar with the way the groups are structured.

Group F – Feedback – is a group that people sometimes find confronting. My role as Nairn's assistant is to instruct the co-facilitating group members on the specific details of each particular group session, and allow them to choose their speaking parts.

I begin by reinforcing the importance of reiterating the purposes and guidelines¹⁰ at the beginning of each group session; routine is important in establishing a safe environment. I ask that they each begin to think of an example of a challenging life experience – something resolved or unresolved – that they can share in order to "set the tone" for self-disclosure by other group members. I caution them that they should feel safe about how much they choose to disclose; that it is their decision. At

¹⁰ Which include the confidentiality pledge (see Appendix D).

the same time, however, I challenge them to tell a personal story which is meaningful to them. I explain about how, after their three stories are shared, they need to invite one or two group members to share a story, and I remember to advise them to leave sufficient take-up time for group members to make this decision.

The “Go-around/Warm up” exercise planned for this group session is one that gives group members time to reflect upon “any new awareness you have gained since the beginning of the group.” This awareness is shared with the group in a go-around. One of the co-facilitators begins this activity,¹¹ and then asks a group member beside her to share her/his awareness with the group, and so on around the circle.

I explain the “Group Activity” next. The format for this particular session can be confusing until it is actually in progress, so I am aware that I need to go carefully through its explanation. I give one of the facilitators the card used in this activity. It reads: “What allows me to feel close to you is...,” and then, “What makes it difficult for me to feel close to people is...” Using the examples in the manual, I model the activity for them. I explain how one facilitator begins the activity by giving feedback to the person on their right. The card is passed to that person and they do the same to the person on their right, and so on around the circle, with each person being encouraged to share feedback in this way. I explain that, when the card is returned to the originating person, it is then passed back the other way, with the person who originally received feedback being able to respond to the person who gave feedback. I model this, too. It’s also my job to answer any questions or concerns the co-facilitators might have about their role or the expectations they might have of other group members.

I check with Kath about her preparedness for her upcoming group facilitation role. She dispels my earlier impression, telling me that she’s *fine with this*, and comparing the role to that of running early morning staff meetings.



On Friday morning as the group session begins, I wonder to myself whether Kath will tell the “same” story¹² she told me during our first interview, or will choose to tell another story when she is expected to “set the tone” for the other group

¹¹ And thereby models it for the group. Group facilitators are expected to model nearly every activity.

¹² See Mishler (2004) for an argument about whether a telling is ever the same. He believes that “people story their lives differently depending on the occasion, audience, and reason for the telling” (p. 101).

members.

When it is her turn to share a story, Kath chooses one based on the same life experience, overlapping her earlier story in places, but adding to it. This time the telling is quite different for her; seemingly much more difficult. I'm aware that she looks down as she speaks, trying to avoid eye contact in order to maintain her calm exterior. She adds the bit I haven't heard and stops. It is too difficult for her to go on. As a group we sit with her pain, accepting her struggle for control, and allowing her the time to be able to tell what she feels she must. She says that she wants to continue. She needs a minute or two. We wait. Tears come. Tissues are passed. She accepts the box, helps herself to one and drops the box to the floor in the centre of our circle. She draws a deep breath, and continues her story. We sit in admiration for her courage. Someone hands her the large teddy bear. She sits it on her lap and hugs it tightly to herself, tears dripping to its head.

Kath is not the only person to have needed to grab a tissue during her story telling, and I am aware that her story has had a powerful emotional impact on the group. I use this "teachable moment" to interrupt Kath's co-facilitators, before they move on with what may seem indecent haste to complete their task. I suggest they pause for a moment and allow group members some time for reflection, or to allow them to express how they feel after hearing Kath's story – either to Kath or to the group as a whole. A few people express their admiration for Kath and share how they are feeling, and after a while the co-facilitators move the group on to the next segment.



For Kath, telling her story at MESH *was confronting. I hadn't quite realised that we would talk about such intimate things amongst people who didn't know each other. It just kind of, yeah, it threw me a little bit that way. But, yep, I was fine doing it, and, yep, I'd be fine doing it in front of my staff, and it'll be a story that'll always hurt and, and I think that there's good learning for everybody in that, including me, and so I'm really happy to, I mean I'm not happy to tell it, but I'm open to telling it and I get something out of it each time. And it's sort of funny about how things come around and go around. When I got home on Friday night, I walked in the door and my youngest son was on the phone. Anyway, he got off the phone and I said, "Who were you talking to?" And he said, "Oh, Dad." "Oh, right." "Yeah, he's just had his other leg off!"* Hub! She throws both hands in the air and chokes out an ironic laugh to express her amazement at the coincidental timing of her hearing about her ex-husband's

operation, almost immediately after her story-telling at MESH.

And I thought, “Well, I’m really pleased I’ve had the day I’ve had!” So, isn’t it funny how things like that happen? So, even if I’d gotten absolutely nothing else out of it at all, the timing for my facilitation couldn’t have been better, because I was feeling like, you know how you do when you get rid of something big like that? You just feel like a sense of release, and that was still there, and so that news didn’t kind of impact on me on top of other things, it was just like, “Oh, poor bugger!”

And the other thing that I did, because that was top of my list, because I’d done the group, when it came to the next group and we [were] doing the letter writing,¹³ that was the letter that I chose to write. And so that’d helped me really clarify my feelings about a separation between still caring about a person, but not actually wanting to be part of their lives any more, and not being in love with them any more.

“And not being responsible for them.”

That’s right. So, writing that down helped me to separate those two things, and so when he gave me that news, [I realised that] I’m not responsible, and “That’s a real shame, mate, but I guess, you know, it’s gotta be, and if he’s in pain then he’s better off that way [without the leg] and he was in a wheelchair anyway.” So, I was able to do all that with Mitch and then [check that he was alright], you know, “How are you?” “No, I’m okay.” And he said, “Oh, I’ll probably go down there in a couple of weeks, though.” You know, so, and the conversa-..., so it was, yeah, it was good.



Kath hasn’t seen her ex-husband since the day he left the island.

Not once during our three interviews, nor during our times together during two MESH workshops, did Kath ever mention her ex-husband’s name.¹⁴



After her MESH experience, Kath offers a different and credible interpretation of what I had perceived as her reticence to co-facilitate a group. *I was really deliberate about not offering to facilitate a group until right towards the end, but if I’d been asked, like if there was a gap, I would’ve done it, but I didn’t wanna do that because I wanted to observe what happened to*

¹³ The group members write two forgiveness letters – one to someone else and one to themselves. It is not the intention that the letters be sent to their recipients, rather it is the process of writing about forgiving a wrong-doing that is the object of the exercise.

¹⁴ I thought that this may have been Kath’s way of blocking out unhappy memories, but in her review of this chapter, Kath said that, although she’s never consciously thought about it, it is her way of respecting that the story is also her ex-husband’s. By not naming him she is keeping his identity anonymous.

try and put it in the context of my staff. So I wanted to be able to see how things sort of gelled for participants, and I was pleased that I did that.



In the final MESH group session, Kath had been surprised to learn that other group members thought that she is strong. *Everybody was saying “There’s this strength or this reservoir,” and I’m thinking, “Oh, okay, right! I don’t think THAT!” Not at all.*

“Yet, I see you as being a strong person.”

Yeah, it’s really interesting, isn’t it?”

“You probably don’t feel it yourself?”

No! Not even a little bit. And like the trauma that I go through when I have to do hard things. Oh, I beat myself up about stuff sometimes, and yeah, I don’t think I’m strong at all.

“I think that your interpretation of strong is different to mine, perhaps. When I think of you as being a strong person, I see you as having overcome adversity, you know, the strength to overcome adversity and to move forward in your life, that strength.”

But what other choices do you have? Yeah, [so] that was a bit interesting. Sort of perturbed me. Taught me that I think sometimes I’m a bit quick to judge and that came back at me again, like you just always have to shut up and watch and listen before you do make [judgment], and sometimes things aren’t the way they seem to be, and if you give it time that will become more clear, which I know is a sort of weakness in me – that I’m sometimes too quick to judge. And that’s ‘cos I’m in a hurry, you know, because [when] you’re an over-achiever you’ve got to get that done so you can get that, you know, da-da-da-da-dah, so yeah, yeah, they’re probably the two main things, mm.

“So how did MESH help you to recognise yourself as judging others too quickly?”

Some of the things that were said and done turned out to be the very, the reasons that they were said, and they were very different as the group moved through. So I thought, yeah, that’s just reminding me that the way things seem to be isn’t always the way that they are.

“So there might be more to people than you actually see in them at first?”

That’s right, that’s right, yeah. Yeah, that’s probably one of the main things, AND, I get wild with the teachers sometimes because they act like kids, and I think, “Well, you’re the grown-ups here. You’ve had your chances.” And part of our job is to give a child another chance, another chance, another chance and in that way I’m judgmental on the teachers because sometimes I don’t give them another chance, and I haven’t reconciled that I should. Because they are still the grown-ups and we

have a duty of care [to our students]. But sometimes I think, yep, it's part of the job to "put the boots in" ¹⁵ when they need to be put in, but sometimes you need to just give more support, more support, more support, rather than do that, yeah. So it's helped me, that's been affirming for me, that that's the way I need to keep going.

"So recognising that some teachers are probably dealing with issues that you don't know about, or pasts that you don't really understand, and things like that?"

Yeah, yep, yep. And maybe I never will. And it's really just that, for me, being able to reflect on what's inside the skin, yeah, and the importance of always leaving a door open, so the person has an opportunity. And the other thing that it [MESH] helped me to come back to, is how important it is to separate the behaviour from the person all the time. You know, just critical stuff. Yeah.



"They'll participate by enabling it to happen"

Kath's first experience of MESH affirmed her belief that a whole-staff MESH PD might benefit her school staff, and have positive repercussions for the students. She contacted Nairn and made arrangements for her to facilitate a whole-staff MESH PD workshop during the 3 days prior to the beginning of the school year in 2005. As a result of the engagement that I'd had with the MESH training, which included several experiences of co-facilitating groups with Nairn, she invited me to facilitate one of three staff groups. I agreed, admittedly with some feelings of trepidation; this was to be my first solo group facilitation role, and Kath was a participant in my study.



With planning underway, Kath was pleased to delve further into her thinking about how the program would be received by school staff. She was aware, for example, that different aspects of the program would probably be attractive to different staff members. *The information that's provided in the lectures will give those people that're the black-and-white, you know, [the] "We're here to do this job" [people], that'll provide that kind of stuff for them.*

"Cos some of those statistics [on addiction, depression, suicide, and so on] are very confronting, aren't they?"

¹⁵ Be harsh with, or reprimand, teachers.

But it's there, it's data, it's not opinion, it's, she slaps her hands together to indicate the factual nature of the statistics. *So I think that'll be good for those people [who are black-and-white thinkers]. Another set of teachers, another group of personalities, [although they wouldn't want to run groups themselves, would] say, "These groups are fantastic." And at least those others who are not so interested will value the group [and its potential to support students], and that will enable it to happen [within the school] as a legitimate part of what we do here.*

All I want them to do is know and understand about it [the MESH program], and there isn't a requirement on my part [that staff will have to facilitate groups] at the end of that at all. SO, I don't have any expectation about what it [MESH] will lead to, but I would be really surprised if there weren't a few people who really wanted to do groups as part of their work, and I want to enable that to happen.

I guess that's another thing that'll come out of it [the proposed whole-staff MESH PD], the teachers that're teaching in different parts of the school will get to know each other a bit better, and so that gives them another way of linking. They might run a group together, or "Look, I'll cover your class so you can do that group for 8 weeks."

Even if a person isn't interested in the group stuff, it might be that it just gives them another set of skills that they can use in their conversation with kids in helping them to solve problems. Like Patti, a teacher who was talking to Kath at recess time when I was present, she's very black-and-white, she's a maths/science teacher. Sees the world in very black-and-white terms, but she's a really committed mum. She's certainly not a fool. Her heart is in the right place and she does care about the kids. So, I can see her absolutely lapping up all that data. And, I reckon she will say, "I couldn't do one of those groups. I couldn't facilitate that," because she's too reserved, very shy, and she wouldn't be open. But, when she's talking to kids, she won't forget that stuff either, and that will make her more effective.

So, [I'll] be accepting that, while they don't want to participate in facilitating groups, they'll participate by enabling it [support groups within the school] to happen. Things like this [PD], I think, give teachers a common language, because they've had a common experience, and some common challenges, and so that makes the staff more cohesive as a group, too. And I think that's really important in building a positive school culture. And then that helps them to be resilient. 'Cos it's tough, it's a tough job, you know? And so, if you feel like, oh, you know, I can tell this person [something], or that person can help me because we've had all of that common experience, then it just makes their work easier as well as more effective.



To accommodate the 3-day workshop, Kath negotiated with staff for them to return to work a day earlier than usual.¹⁶ However, this requirement (after an 8-week summer break), and Kath's insistence that all staff attend the workshop, meant that some staff members were feeling quite aggrieved, which created some tension within the group. A few staff members were outwardly hostile and not keen to participate in the workshop, in the first instance.

In a move designed to show transparency, early on Day 1 staff members' names were drawn from a hat and staff members were assigned to work with the different group facilitators. The twelve staff members in my group included the assistant principal, the district social worker, various teachers and support staff, two office workers, and a lab technician. As luck would have it, neither Kath nor Kym were allocated to my group. I was relieved about this, as I wanted each of them to experience their second group free from any pressure they may feel as study participants. And, frankly, I was nervous enough without the added strain of having either of them watch my first solo "performance."



"It certainly has made a difference"

My third interview with Kath took place in October of 2005; eight months to the day since the whole-staff MESH PD at Oceanview began, and slightly over a year since our second interview. After such a long wait, I was very keen to hear from Kath about what was happening for herself, her staff and students.



Of her experience in her first group, Kath recalls that *it was a really good bonding experience. Janie [another principal] I see kind of pretty regularly and there's that automatic kind of trust thing that keeps coming back. The group experience makes you a bit brave; you're not as concerned or worried or frightened of exposing bits about yourself that you might have been concerned and worried about before you had that experience, 'cos it really doesn't hurt. It's a bit cathartic.*

It's okay to talk about that stuff that's really close to me, and other people can do the same thing, and out of that comes some good. It's the kind of PD, I guess, that you could do more than once and still get value. Having said that, during her second group experience, Kath found *the*

¹⁶ Kath changed the scheduling of staff meetings and so on, in order to off-set the time spent in the PD.

opportunity to listen to what other people had to say was a bigger benefit [than telling her own story].



Kath is keen to share with me the influence of the whole-staff PD on her staff. I'm pleased to hear that she considers the outcomes *brilliant. I'm really happy. It certainly has made a difference and I think it was worth doing. It was worth all the pain.* Kath's mention of pain is a direct reference to the animosity that some staff members had directed towards her as a result of her requirement that all staff participate in the PD. While, at the end of the 3 days, all staff had appeared to be positive about their experience in terms of benefits to themselves and staff relationships, a vocal few had been quite outspoken in their initial resentment of Kath's insistence upon their attendance. Kath acknowledges that she was *ABSOLUTELY* responsible for having put them in this position. *I mean they'd agreed to it, but I don't think that they recognised what emotions it might draw out of them. But as I said, I wouldn't undo it, it was definitely worthwhile.*

Kath brings up the issue of collegial trust. *In the first little while, while the memories of the group were fresh, it was more about being close to the members of your own group, but I think that pretty quickly dissipated and it's really that we've all been through this thing and it was hard, but it was really worthwhile. So, it's kind of a shared experience now. I think that's the value of it.* After this initial within-group camaraderie, she believes that the groups that people were allocated to mattered little *other than individuals maybe knowing something about where somebody else comes from [metaphorically speaking] that they could use in that relationship.*

Kath reports that there are support groups being facilitated in the school, and she is pleased to tell me that *nobody [on staff] even questions if somebody says, "Oh, I'm taking a group."* She expresses her disappointment, however, that, apart from a couple of her Grade 7 teachers, the running of the groups still lies *within the realms of support, so teachers aren't taking on [the running of groups] themselves.* A couple of teachers had, however, commented to Kath, *"I wish I was brave enough to do a group myself."* So, it seems to me that while the teachers appear content to have students attend groups – and see value for students in the group process – they may lack the necessary self-confidence to facilitate a group. And this reticence is something I can well understand.



A range of different groups is being offered within the school, attracting the participation of approximately 70 students. As a result, Kath is aware that the profile

of students seeking help is changing. The students *with the really high needs [now] tend to go to the social worker*, allowing the social worker to work more intensively with the more needy students.¹⁷ The support groups cater for *those [students] the next layer down*.

Kath is *really looking forward to next year* when another support teacher – who previously ran MESH support groups at Oceanview – will return from maternity leave. *That'll mean that we'll get to do more of them [the support groups]. But it creates better relationships, there's less anxiety and stress with teachers, with each other.*

So, I think in ways that are probably hard to measure, it's actually made a difference around the place. There's less distrust and anxiety, so it's been good like that.



“Story’s the original kind of tool that we use for teaching really”

Kath tells me that she shared a different story during the whole-staff MESH PD held at Oceanview High School to the one she told during her first MESH experience. *I think it was just that the circumstance was so different, and that I wasn't going in there as a work thing [for my first MESH experience] and they were people that I didn't know, and that I had chosen to tell a story that was [a] really difficult one to tell. Whereas the context was so different the second time around, that I'd made a different decision for good reasons and so I think that my purpose in the telling was less selfish the second time around. I was telling it for the other people, I wasn't telling it for myself. Whereas the first time, I was very aware that I was telling it for myself.*

Particularly in light of Kath's strategic storytelling, I am interested to know whether Kath believes that story is important in learning.

Yep. I think that story's the original kind of tool that we use for teaching really. And if you go back to the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers that's how they taught, they told stories, and a story brings with it an automatic mechanism for a person to make meaning in their own context, and so I think that's why it's so powerful. I think that a story is a non-threatening kind of a way to present something that might be quite challenging in another context, because it all comes from you, so you're not requiring the listener to do anything else, other than listen.

Kath's storytelling experience at MESH, taught her *that it's actually cathartic to get rid of some of that stuff, but also once you've done it more than once you can actually take a step back and be removed almost from telling it, so it's easier to do, but also you're able to think more carefully*

¹⁷ This observation supports the view of a primary school principal in another school where Nairn and I had previously co-facilitated a whole-staff PD.

about the impact that you're having on the people you're telling it to. So, I think that the more capacity that I had to distance myself as I was telling it, the more realisation that I was able to have on the effect that I might have on people. So, I was able to be more careful about the language I'd use and stuff like that. And also, kind of testing the temperature as I was saying it, yeah.

Kath also understands that there may be learning for others in listening to her stories, and this appears to have influenced her decisions about which stories to tell. *In the second group, the school-based one, when I was telling my stories, it was to try to share some of my self, in that, "Here I am as a person. Yes, I have this job in the school, however these are the other things about me." So it was really encouraging people to take that risk with each other and to say to them, by modelling it, that it's alright to talk about these things with your colleagues if you want to. I was trying to say, "I am a more complex character than the principal that you see, and these are some of the other bits to me, take them for what they're worth. I don't ask you to make a judgement, but I give it to you anyway."*

The listening experience in the group setting gave Kath the opportunity to hear other people's stories, and from this she learned that *every one of us has got a tale to tell, and there are very few of us that get to a certain age without having some hurdles to climb.* Given more time to reflect, though, Kath found that *after the event, I thought, "That's no excuse [for teachers being unforgiving of students]." 'Cos I go to school with this really deep-seated value that the kids deserve another chance, and another chance, and another chance. And, I'm a bit hard, I suppose, because I don't feel that way about the adults working with the kids, because quite often they will make a demand of me that I think is unreasonable because of that value. You know, "This kid rattled my cage." And I'm like, "Well, hey, you're the adult! So warts and all, sad stories and all, you are still the adult. You've had your turn at childhood. It is your job as a teacher to take a step back and give that kid another chance." And so, having heard all those stories just made me think, well, underneath, my value hasn't changed, and that is that recognising all of that stuff, and each other, still needs to mean this [lot of expectations of you] if you're a teacher.*

"So, putting kids first?"

That's right. And it didn't change that, and when I talk about those limited resources, yes, I recognise that some people have that. That doesn't impact on the value that I hold so dearly though. Yeah. And so I guess, back to your question, what it has done, is enabled me to articulate that even more clearly.

Reflecting upon both MESH experiences, Kath believes that she gained more in her role as a listener than as a story-teller. *That's the bit about me. I like collecting stories. They*

stick up there, she taps the side of her head three times with her index finger, and I reflect on them. I go home and reflect on other people's stories and that's the love of it.

“What features do you think made some stories powerful as a means of developing understanding or learning?”

Ah, I think that's a really hard question to answer, because I think it depends on the listener. Having said that, though, it depends on how deeply held the story is by the teller. I think that, even for those people who only contributed by listening, if the stories meant a lot to the teller, then they gleaned from that what they needed. So, I think that, for everybody in the group, what they'd take from stories was different, and some stories might impact and others not so much, depending on their own stories, and depending on what rang true with them, or what they could connect with. That's a hard question, 'cos I don't think that I could speak for listeners other than myself. But I do think that part of it is about how deeply held the story is for the teller. 'Cos, regardless of content, if you think somebody's telling you something about themselves that's really highly personal and precious to them – and precious doesn't necessarily mean easy, it could be precious 'cos it's so hard to divulge – that the listener will take away that this person respects and thinks enough of me in this setting to tell me that. So that would be the least I think that you'd get. And on top of that, all sorts of things, just depending on where you are [psychologically or emotionally].



“This restless spirit”

Several times over the course of my meetings with Kath, she spoke about other job offers and prospects, many of these unsolicited by her.

I think there's something in principals, quite often, especially female ones, that's this restless spirit. It's kind of like you're never good enough for yourself. So, you get something vaguely right and no, you can't just enjoy it. You've gotta move on and find something equally challenging.

There comes a time and you know that it's right to go, in terms of the life of the school, not for yourself; that, yep, you've made your imprint and it's time for somebody else with different ideas and a different direction to have a go.



Late in 2006, Kath was promoted to a senior position within the Department of Education. The newly-voiced “student at the centre” philosophy of the department is a cosy fit with Kath's understanding of the purposes of schooling. She has said that

she'll miss her daily interactions with students, so I hope that she will find her new position rewarding in different ways.

Chapter 5

Kym Oliver

*"I feel like I'm only part-way through my journey.
There's more yet."*

Kath Rivers had said to me, *Come on, let's go find Madam. You're in for a treat!* as she was taking me to meet and interview Kym Oliver, one of the teachers at Oceanview High School. And Kath was correct; meeting Kym was, indeed, a treat.

At our first interview, before I'd had a chance to ask one question, Kym had made herself at home by settling into one of the lounge chairs in Kath's office. She helped herself to the sweets that Kath had offered to us from her coffee table bowl, and proceeded to tell me about her experience of school as a student, sharing with me some of the ups and downs of her life. Early in our conversation, it didn't surprise me at all to learn that, as well as being a generalist Grade 7/8 teacher, Kym is also a specialist drama teacher, for she talks with her eyes, her hands, her whole being.



"I can do this, the teaching thing"

Kym's primary years were spent in the public school system, which she enjoyed up until Grade 2. *'Til Grade 2 I liked it, then Grade 3 I didn't mind it, and then it slowly got worse.* Kym's growing dislike of school meant that both her school results and reported behaviour were poor. As a result, during her high school years she attended St Bridget's College, *mainly because Mum thought, "Send you to a private school, then you'll work." Wasn't the place for me!*

By Year 10, I did think, "Okay, it's time to knuckle down, settle down." But it was too late, because once a dog gets a bad name it sticks, and half the time it wasn't me in classrooms that had mucked up, but I just got the blame for it anyway. It was awful. I hated it, I hated life!

Kym had dreamt of a fairytale future. *My aim in life was to leave school and marry somebody and have as many children as I possibly could. And that's all I wanted to do, just have lots and lots of children that I could love. They'd love me, I'd love them. And we'd live happily ever after.*

I NOW know it was to do with my background, that that's why I wanted all this. She pauses, before jumping ahead to talk about more recent years. *Then I was a teacher's aide for 6, nearly 7, years, but in that time I decided, "I can do this, the teaching thing."* Later, as is typical at school reunions, Kym was asked by her old classmates, *"What're you doing now?" and I said, "Oh, I'm gonna be a teacher."* They said, *"What a joke!" 'cos I was VERY naughty at school. Extremely naughty. And they said, "You? Gonna be a teacher?!" I said, "I'm serious!"* And she was.

Kym began her studies in education at the University of Tasmania in 1999. Even though I'd begun my studies the same year, we had never met. *She got some credit¹ so completed her (in-service)² studies in 3 years, full-time, while she also worked full-time.* Uni was hard for Kym, who says that she *didn't enjoy any of it. I hated uni. Didn't like it one little bit. And I didn't give anything up to do uni. My life never changed, I just ADDED! "I'll fit this in,"* she'd told herself of her uni studies. *I did the biggest theatre show I've ever, ever done when I was either second or third year at uni.* She had even accepted the lead role in the production. *It was the biggest lead role I'd ever done in all the years! I got through [uni]. How? I don't know! It's a wonder I didn't BREAK!*

She jumps ahead again to the culmination of her years of study. *The best part was graduation. The best part.*

"It's a bit of a high, isn't it?" I comment, well remembering, but understating, somewhat, how I'd felt about my own graduation day.

The Friday before graduation, I just had tears all day thinking about it. I hardly slept that night, and when I did get to sleep and woke up the next morning, it was just like Santa had been when you were a little kid. And I cried all day. It was SUCH HARD work for me, it was so hard, so very, very hard, I struggled, big time at uni, and to get there, just like, "Oh my God, it's me, I've done it!"

¹ Time allowed off non-core subjects in Kym's teacher education course, because of a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) qualification she had attained prior to her university enrolment.

² A Bachelor of Education (In-Service) Degree is a teaching degree designed to accommodate students seeking a professional upgrade while employed in an educational setting. At enrolment, many students are working as teachers' aides. Others are upgrading from a 2- or 3-year teaching qualification.

Like me, when she'd left high school, Kym would never have entertained the idea of furthering her education in any way, let alone believing she could study at university. *Never! I would never, I would never have been accepted. My REPORTS! I FAILED everything. I was Level 1 lower passes if I didn't fail! I had a terrible, TERRIBLE opinion of myself. I was dumb, and my husband used to tell me that I was dumb, and like when Liam said, "Mum's going to uni," he said, "Oh God, she's too dumb, she wouldn't be going there." So yeah, after all my life, I've just sat there at this graduation and it was just SO emotional. I nearly cry now thinking about it. I had to pinch myself, "Is it really you? This is me! I'm a-new."*

"I'm a teacher." I finish what at first seems like an unfinished sentence.

Yeah. And, to go to uni, like I couldn't even go to COLLEGE! Oh, it was just amazing. I was just stoked, because I actually didn't think I'd ever get through, "No, I'll give it a go, but it'll be too hard," and so it was one step at a time. When I got through Year 1, "Okay, we've got through." It was so hard.

On the day [that I graduated], my self-esteem was like just through the roof, but that slowly went again, and I've got to keep reminding myself, I have to keep saying, "Listen, you're a good person, you're a professional person, you're a teacher for God's sake!" you know, and I forget, I sorta just take it for granted now, I forget.



Not forgotten by Kym, however, is how much she had wanted the approval of her family at that time, particularly that of *my Mum and my brother – because I didn't have good relationships there, and I hadn't seen them in years. The day I drove into my very first summer school, there was this University of Tasmania sign, and I pulled over, and I had butterflies. I started to laugh, I started to cry, I went, "Who'd ever have thought?!" And I wanted someone to grab them and sit them there and say, "Look what she's doin', she's about to go in there." I just wanted them to know so BADLY, 'cos my brother was the high flyer you see, of the family, and the good footballer, and I was just that silly one that was good at drama. "She's silly," you know, "That won't ever get her a living."*



Despite the lack of support from most of her family, Kym had the support of one of her work colleagues (who had been a university lecturer) and her own son, who both inspired her to keep going and finish her studies. Her colleague, who knew how much Kym struggled with completing assignments, and that she had considered

dropping out of uni, would *come into the [school] classroom, and she'd say, "This is what you do best. This is what you're good at. This is why you've gotta go to uni. Uni's the stepping stone,"* reminding her that qualifying as a teacher – her ultimate goal – could only be achieved by completing her studies.

At other times, her ex-husband unwittingly provided her with the motivation to keep going. *The days that I felt like giving in, I'd think of him and think, he'd say, "That'd be RIGHT! I KNEW she wouldn't do it! For Christ's sake, you don't have to be Einstein to work out that she'd never do it!" So, I'd think, "No, keep going, keep going, keep going."*

And that probably affected Liam more so than me in the end, 'cos when I graduated they said to me, "Do you want a copy of your graduation certificate?" And I said, "No," and Liam said, "I do!" And I said, "What for?" And he said, "To post to Dad." And I said, "Okay."



"I believe the timing was right for me though. I was ready for it"

Kym learned about MESH through a colleague. *Alison Young came up to me and said, "Here you go. If you're doing my job next year, you'll need to perhaps do this."* Handing Kym a flyer, she'd said, *"Go and run it by Kath."* And Kath went, *"I want you doing that. You've GOTTA do that."* And I said, *"What is it?"* and when she told me, I thought, *"Maybe this has happened for a reason. This is really good because I can do it with the kids, but it might be good for me."*

*One of my best friends that knows all [about] my life, had told Kym a little about the program. She said, "It's highly confidential. You and I have been to counselling sessions, we've been to natural therapy stuff. I'm telling you now, this will rock your socks." She said, "Until I'd been, I'd never been to anything like this." And I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "You're gonna be exhausted." And I said, "Oh, but you are after counselling." "Nuh!" she said, "This'll be just what you need." And I said, "How do you mean it'll be just what I need?" And she said, "All your past will come up." And I said, "Oh! In front of a heap of people? Hardly! Nuh!" She said, "Well, it will." I said, "You didn't tell them your story?" She said, "Yeah, I did!" I said, "Oh, God! No, I'm gonna be with my principal!" I said, "No, I'm not [telling my story], it'd take too long anyway; my life's just full of, you know, I just." Kym exhales at the thought of having to story her life to others. Her friend had said, *"Just be prepared."* And I said, *"Are you serious?"* And she said, *"Yep!"**

Despite the reservation that Kym feels about telling her story in front of a group of

strangers and her principal, she has *high hopes* for the PD. *I REALLY hope that it's what I need for myself personally. I'm WRAPPED that I'm being sent!* she enthuses. *I know that I still carry lots of muck from years ago – and I'm hoping to get rid of it. Oh God, wouldn't it be nice to completely get rid of it! MAYBE this is the person that I'm going to go to – FINALLY after going here, there and everywhere – that'll go, "This is the way you deal with it. Get rid of it!"*

◆◆◆ First MESH experience ◆◆◆

Responding wholeheartedly to my question about what she'd thought of MESH after her first experience, Kym said, *FAN-TASTIC! Mm-m. Absolutely fantastic! To be fully engaged for 3 days, that was HUGE! Got lots out of it. I believe the timing was right for me, though. I was ready for it*, she elaborated. *But, yeah, it's been strange. I haven't talked about it to people a lot. I've said, "It was JUST fantastic!" but it was, it felt, a very personal experience.*

Kym believes in the MESH process, but at the same time she is aware that *what comes out of it* will be dependent upon *what you give of yourself*. Kym says that this was a realisation early in the MESH workshop, and, as a consequence, she had been very open in the way she interacted with the group. She says that she felt open to change.

Over the 3 days, Kym had appeared to me to be on an emotional high. When I mentioned this to her, she agrees. *YEAH, I was. But since I've come back I'm not down, but I'm exhausted. I can't get over this exhaustion. Friday night I felt like I had no legs. They weren't there. I know I wasn't grounded. I was beside myself. I wanted to talk to people, but I didn't. I wanted to be on my own, but I didn't. I didn't know what I wanted. It was just the most BIZARRE feeling.*

Because of the restless state she'd been in, Kym had telephoned a work colleague to cancel their planned evening out. *She just was beside herself to the point she didn't want to talk to me. She said, "I can't talk to you. You sound like somebody that's found Christianity, and it gives me the shits! I don't wanna talk to you."* And I said, "Okay!" And I was fine with it, I just went, "Oh, okay, yep."

I could quite easily go back and do it [the MESH PD] again. I really feel that I dealt with lots of stuff in 3 days, and I had a lot to deal with, and I didn't deal with a lot of it there. I did, but a lot more of it I dealt with it at home. I came home and dealt with it that night. I went to bed and I went through the MESH stuff and forgave people and wrote letters. So I was doing lots of that sort of stuff.

The long days, coupled with the late nights she'd spent at home processing and

acting on what she'd learnt, had left Kym feeling *REALLY tired, REALLY drained* over the weekend. *And I'm just wondering, I feel light! It's hard to explain. Maybe it opened up so many things for me at MESH and I got rid of so much. Maybe this is the way you feel, it's adjusting to being, accepting who I am. It's weird.* She attributes her new-found self-acceptance to her participation in *the small group stuff. All the talking and dealing with it.*

And I'd already started to deal with some baggage that I had in other ways [prior to MESH]. I tried numerous other things. It was only a few weeks before this I decided that there were a couple of books I had, and I thought, 'I'll get those back out and I'll really get in and start to heal things, you know, get rid of a lot of this stuff that's been here for a long time.' So MESH couldn't have come at a better time. I was ready for it. I'd decided, *'I've had enough of the way I live my life, I've got to do something about it.'* And the funny bit is, *the times have never been right that I've read them [before]. Now, I'm taking it all in, when I'm reading them. [Previously] I've read it and don't remember it, but now I'm taking it in. And, what I've read [is that] storing all this stuff that we all store, that came out at MESH, causes diseases. Now, if you can store all that stuff and it causes diseases, imagine when it's gone. And that's why I think I'm feeling like I am, because it's all gone now, it's like well, you're not carrying all that crap with you. But I don't think you have to have baggage to do it [MESH].*



"I've never forgiven me"

A huge influence on Kym's self-concept and self-esteem was her marriage. *I was married very, very young. I moved in with my husband, or ex-husband, I was 17, and moved in with him. He had three children to his first marriage. They were 3, 2 and 1 [years old] and I lived with him. I moved in with him very, very quickly. Basically, a quick outline was [that I] hated the world, hated everything, hated being at home.*

Upon reflection, Kym recognises that she was running away from everything she hated. Of course, at the time, she believed that she was setting out to make her fairytale a reality. Her thinking was: *I'll love your kids, I'll show them what love is, they'll love me, he'll love me, because I love them.* She realised too late that moving in with a man who *didn't ever intend for me to stay there* wasn't the basis for a happy life. *Had a really rotten, rotten, rotten marriage, but I was always there to pick the pieces up and have the children and, when you look back now, of course he was going to go off and have affairs and things, because the base was never there. I mean, I couldn't want for anything. We had a beautiful, brand new home we built that had everything, and a farm, and this and that, but always knew I was unhappy and wanted to*

go.

At 21, Kym became pregnant and had her son; *my boy, Liam*, as she often speaks of him. *Always wanted another baby, desperate, desperate, desperate, NEVER was allowed, 'cos we already had the other three. And I hated that, but never mind. Once I'd had him nothing else mattered. "I'll be right. I don't care what you do with your life, Richard, but as long as I've got this baby, I'm right." Didn't send him to kinder, 'cos I didn't want him to go to school and leave me. Finally got a grip on myself, 'cos a friend was a principal and she said to me, "You've gotta let him go." Couldn't handle it, so I went to TAFE and started hairdressing. Stopped. It was too hard. Went back again and ended up doing beauty culture. Worked as a beauty therapist for quite some time. Anyway, the marriage broke up when I was 29. Richard, my husband, broke that off. As much as I'd always wanted to, I'd never had the guts to go. I look at my married life, and look at my life now, and I was more lonely in my married life than I am now, and I learned lots.*

In contrast to the emptiness of her relationship with Richard, Kym emphasises the *wonderful relationship* she shares with Liam. *We are extremely close. People are forever commenting on it and saying what a great kid he is and that's all because of my home life, my married life, has made Liam and I have what we've got today. He's very, very, very together, very, very. He's my teacher at times, still.*

◆◆◆ First MESH experience ◆◆◆

The unresolved nature of many feelings she'd harboured over the years contributed to the meaning Kym found in one aspect of the 3-day workshop; *forgiveness, that's huge*. Kym was referring to one of the eight group sessions, which focuses on the act of forgiveness. Participants are asked to write two letters during the group session: a letter forgiving someone who has harmed them,³ and then a letter to themselves. *The whole unit on forgiveness, in the manual. That was amazing.*

Kym recalls her prior experiences in counselling sessions, during which she had divulged aspects of her marital relationship, without ever resolving many issues. During MESH, however, *the whole lecture as well as the group makes you see WHY you feel this way*. She has been able to connect the theory with her own life; *the way we are, and the way we feel as children and things that happen, and this is how you grow up. Nairn more or less says, "That's okay. Don't bash yourself up about it. It happened. But just forgive them, and forgive you." Whereas counselling they don't do that. They don't say to you, "You need to forgive yourself.*

³ There is no requirement or compulsion for participants to send the letters they write. It is the act of expressive writing itself that is important to healing (Joshua Smyth & Helm, 2003; Rimé, 1995).

You need to write a letter.” Kym had had the opportunity to express in writing the feelings she had never before voiced. And while her letters remained unsent, she had found the exercise to be a valuable one.



Developing the courage to trust others was also significant for Kym. *To be able to tell something [in the group] and know that, even though you’ve made this pledge of confidentiality, they could still go away from here and break that [pledge], and “I have put myself out there, big, to you guys, and [I’m] hoping that I can trust you,” and I think it releases something inside of you to be able to do that. The things that I shared at MESH, I’ve shared with other people too. Not to the extent that, that’s a whole group, and that’s what I was trying to say. This is a risk, because as much as that’s confidential, you don’t know that someone’s not going to go away and say, “Listen, that Kym Oliver, by jingies!” Alright, we make that pledge, but you can break that. It can be broken. It could, couldn’t it?*

“It could be broken. Yep, it could.”

So, when you’re pretty cynical, as I have been for a lot of years about things, it was a big, big risk to open [myself] up. My biggest risk was going with my principal. I told her a story. I shared some pretty huge stuff with her that I didn’t share with the group, going home, and that’s what I said, we were talking about the risk, and I said, “Look, this is what I wanted to say, but I couldn’t.” And I told her [a life story], and I said, “You know, you could quite easily say, ‘Oh, my God! Duncan,’ to our AP, ‘Listen, Kym shared some stuff with me that freaks me out. I don’t think we need her around children, you know, it’s not a ...’” – not that it was anything.

Nairn put on the board about these “fishwife mothers,” I call them, which I’ve been, where you, they scream all the time and the kid grows up with this screaming. I was like that with my step kids.

“Were you?”

Yeah! Absolutely. I was forever flippin’ and hittin’ ‘em. I used to get that ANGRY, angry, not that I hurt them, but I would think, “Oh, God, I could quite easily,” if I was driving the car I’d have put it through a fence quite easily, and anyway, I went on and told Kath all about that, and I said, “I’m not proud of who I was, as their mother.” And she said, “No, hang on a minute,” and she was really good and said, “You know, you were 17,” and I said, “I never looked at it like that.” She said, “You were a kid yourself! You didn’t know any other [way].” And she said, “The main thing is you’ve gotta forgive yourself for that,” and I said, “Yeah, I do, don’t I?”

Because I’d been saying, “Sorry,” to the kids, visualising, “Sorry,” to them, because I know that

they remember, and they've brought it up to me at times and thrown it at me, "We want nothing to do with you. We remember what you were like," and I used to lay in bed and say, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," to them, but I'd never said, "Sorry," to me. And Kath said about that. Now, Kath could quite easily have said to Duncan, "Listen," you know, "this happened to Kym 25 years ago. She used to be roarin' and yellin'. She'd flick the kid with a wooden spoon, her step-child, you know, I don't know if we want her around kids if she's like that." And she said, "I'd NEVER do that to you," and I said, "But, for somebody like me that's got no confidence or trust in people, what I'm saying to you, this is huge for me to [disclose to you]." It was like I just went, "Stuff it! I'm gonna tell these stories." And I told Kath, and if the consequence is I'm sacked or something happens, so be it. It was meant to be. And that's how I am about everything now [since MESH].

Kath said to me, the other day, she said, "I'm not surprised you were exhausted. By jingies, you let go of a lot of stuff." I said, "I did. More so to you in the car probably." And, yeah a lot at MESH, but then as much in the car, and it was the risk of what the consequence is from telling people this stuff.

"But when you look at it, what is the risk, now, you know?"

That's right. Yeah. It's out, and I feel great for it.

See, before, I used to blame Richard. I'd just say, "You're a mongrel makin' me look after these kids while you went out and played cricket. You mongrel." And then I would blame me. I stopped blaming him and started blaming me, and saying sorry to them. And giving them, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," visualising, 'cos I don't see them, I'd visualise this forgiveness. Then I realised, "No, fool, I need to forgive me as well. I've forgiven them I don't know how many times." See I've been to Reiki for about 3 years. I cut the ties with Richard and did all this work [on myself], but it never healed like this [MESH] did.

"So forgiving you was good?" I sum up.

Yeah!

"Forgiving Richard?"

Yeah! Yeah, forgive him and then YOU! Forgive YOU!



"I get too involved with the kids"

Kym talked a lot in our interviews about her relationships with students. One particular issue had been troubling her when we spoke in our first interview. *I've had*

issues here with kids, and Kath said to me, "That's your background coming out." I get too involved with the kids. I feel for them, and I understand them.

Kym's use of "too involved" seems to infer that either she, or her school colleagues, viewed her response to her students in a negative way. "Do you think that's a bad thing, though?" I check.

No, I don't. No, I don't think it's a bad thing, but a lot of other teachers, though, think it's a bad thing. If you teach with people that have no idea like that, and they're only interested in working with high flyers and stuff, they don't know where you're coming from when you're talking to some of these kids.

◆◆◆ First MESH experience ◆◆◆

Following the PD, Kym developed new insights and perspectives. *It's just freaky what's happening with the kids! I went up to a kid today that's always the naughty, naughty, naughty kid, and I saw past it, and I said, "Are you alright? Do you want to talk about something?" And he said, "Yeah, I do!" And like, "Oh, my God!" it's just blossomed. He ended up opening up to me, and I think that was because others have tried, I've tried before, but [this time] he saw something different in me. I sat and talked to him for him. I knew something was wrong. I looked past this yucky side of him and thought, "There's got to be something going on."*

There's another boy that just has got this big front up with me all the time and there's been issues with him and I, and his parents, and I've looked past it and got talking to him the other day, and all this stuff came out, just by a conversation, and I thought, "Oh, my God! MESH!" So, MESH has taught me that just 'cos he comes from a fantastic family, and [is] not short of a bob doesn't mean that, yeah.

"So, it's broken down some of your prejudices about who might need help?"

Oh, yeah, absolutely. Yeah! Yep. And you just look beyond, all the time. So, professionally it's been absolutely FAN-tastic.

Kym's understanding crossed the socio-economic divide between her own upbringing and that of some of her more well-to-do students. *I think it's just fantastic to see how, put into perspective, some of the kids that come from GOOD families and we put the pressure on them to always do well, and, oh, it was amazing, just amazing.* Kym was beginning to realise that what she's previously thought of as a perfect life isn't necessarily perfect. She is developing a growing appreciation that different lives have different stresses.

I don't get as angry with kids, annoyed, 'cos I just think, "There's a reason." And I always KNEW there was a reason, but MESH has just made me see it differently. I've been to PDs that tell you that there's a reason why, but this, just the whole MESH thing, for you, for the kids, for the way it was conducted, I don't know what it is but you just honestly, I, I just feel so different.

For me, it's already made a difference in school. I know that. I was the first to go, "Get 'em out!" I was the biggest believer in suspension. "Get 'em out! No point in havin' 'em here. Why would you have them here? Teach them a lesson! TEACH them! And if it's not teaching them, it's teaching their peers, that you muck up you get out, you gotta get out!" But [now] I just think, "Oh, my God! We've gotta go further. We've gotta do more." Kym no longer sees suspension as the answer, and is aware that behind the students' anti-social and disruptive behaviours are causes; many of which she may be unaware. She is now willing to look beyond student behaviour, and her relationships with students are benefiting.



Kids today, they're very different! Different as in our school days, of course – but not that you would want them to go right back to all that.

Possibly because she's aware of her own struggle with self-esteem, she believes that this is one of the biggest issues facing students today. *The way they feel about themselves is very – I notice that they deal with it differently to the way I knew of people dealing with it. They're more cocky about themselves, and "Dub!" you know, instead of cringing, it's, "Go and get stuffed!" and "Oh, fuck you!" and they get even bigger and louder and nine times out of ten I've found that that always comes back to confidence and their self-esteem. The peer pressure, I've noticed, I think that's big, and alcohol, parties, therefore peer pressure there. "Come along or else you're not good if you don't go."*

And, it's hard, you know, at times. There's one person in particular, I remember growling at him and next thing he was bawling and I said, "Whatever's wrong?" "Oh, Mum and Dad have parted." "Well, why didn't you TELL me? I didn't KNOW!" and "Oh, God!" you think. But when you've got big classes too, you can't, you don't have the time, you say, "Right, is there anybody that wants to tell me what's happened at home," sort of thing, "before we get started?" you know.

The kids know lots of my life story. I don't have problems telling them about my life. They can't believe it. They say things, and this is where I wonder, "Gosh, my self-esteem," because [they say things like], "I bet you were clever," "I bet you were this," "I bet you were a real snob," "I bet you were like this." I go, "Nope!"

Yeah, it's weird. I mean, like Liam said to me, my son, he was in Grade 10 when I did my prac at Sandpiper. "Mum" he said, "They love you! You should be so proud of yourself, they love you!" And I said, "But all I do is being me! I'm honest with them. I tell them the truth," "No, I DIDN'T have a good upbringing! No, I DIDN'T! Yes, I talk to my Mum NOW, but I didn't for 8 years, and I've forgiven my Mum now, because SHE has taught me how not to treat MY SON," and you know, they'll go out, and they'll thank me for telling them. Some days I worry and think, "Oh, it could backfire on me. I shouldn't perhaps tell them this," and you hear some teachers say, "Children don't have to know. You're the teacher, and they don't need to know anything about your life," whereas I just have found that they relate so much better to me.

A kid said to me last year, in Grade 8, I was having real problems with him, and he said to me, "Oh, but your son's got everything, he's so spoilt." And I said, "Pardon?" and I actually wanted to cry when I was telling him, and I said, "Do you know what's been happening lately?" I said, "Let me tell you a story, young man. Oh!" I said, "My son works three jobs as well as goes to school. I haven't been paid for the last 21 weeks. Because I've been doing my teaching prac, he's been supporting ME!" And he said, "Oh, really!" I said, "He's been giving me money. Do you know how much money I get on the pension for being here?" and then I explained to them that my car payment is this, and you know, such-and-such is this." It just opened the door to us that we got on real well. He's just looked at me and said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I had no idea." I said, "No, I know you didn't."

They just thought that Liam was this big snob that had all this money, and 'cos then he got this motorbike and I said, "He saved for that!" I told them that he gets up at 3:00 a.m. and works until 8:00 a.m. and goes to school and he leaves school and he does the milk-round and when he's finished doing the milk-round he goes up to the farm and works 'til it's dark, and then he comes back home and he does his homework and he goes to bed and he gets up at 2:00 a.m. again. And they just went, Kym imitates the student's jaw dropping with incredulity. I said, "See, you don't know people, do you? You just think we've got loads of money 'cos he's got a nice motorbike. It's not like that at all! It's on time payment, for God's sake. That's the only way we could get it."

And then, when I said about Liam supporting me, and I said, "I'll tell you how much money I've got in the bank." And I remember last year two teachers said, "You went too far. There's no need for them to know that." And I said, "No! I'm sorry, I don't want them thinking that I'm Miss That-And-The-Other. I want them to know I'm human just like them and I want them to know that they can do what I've done."

You can do anything in this world. If you really want to, you can do anything.



First MESH experience.

Walking back from lunch together, Kym shares with me that she *loves* the PD, and that, importantly, it is providing her with affirmation of her practice. She had been told by colleagues that sharing aspects of her personal life with students in class is both inappropriate and unprofessional. She feels now that her relationships and behaviour are appropriate to her students' needs and to her adult role-model status. She now believes that her openness is what contributes to her popularity with students.



I had Georgie, a student, tell me yesterday, "How I describe you when people say, 'Do you like Miss Oliver?' 'Yep, but when she's crabby, she's really crabby, but she usually has a reason, but she's awesome.'" And I said, "Oh, that's really nice."

And I am. I'm probably crabbier than a lot of the other teachers I work with, but crabby because when I'm crabby, I'm crabby. Like if something upsets me, they know it's upset me, but I tell them the issue and then I'm on with what we're doing. I said, "Oh, I'm sorry, that's the way it is, I've just gotta air it." I go, "Right! I've told you, you had 3 weeks to do this and you haven't done it and blab-blab-blab-blab-blah. This makes me really cross!" And then I'm right. "Okay, I'm over it now. Thank you!" They think I'm crabby because I'm loud you see. And she said to me, "It's not as if you'd look at us weeks later and go ..." And I said, "No! Never! I forget, within no time at all, I forget." That's the way I operate. I have my say and then I'm right. That's just the way they know I am.

Kym finds, too, that her "crabbiness" generally pays dividends. *I guarantee you they will have whatever it is they should've had there the next DAY. Well, not all of them, but the majority of them.*



Nearly every day, Kym has been aware of changes in her own thinking; changes that she attributes to her first MESH attendance. She shares one anecdote with me to illustrate this. *The other day, a couple of boys were rolling around on the grass and I looked at Kath and said, "They need a bit of a cuddle. Let 'em go."* I laugh at the way she expresses the boys' need for physical touch. *And they were fightin' and I said, "Leave 'em. Oh, they'll be right."* Kath said, *"MESH again!"* I said, *"What?"* She said, *"You would've growled at them*

[prior to MESH].” I said, “I know. Normally, I would’ve.”

“And she was willing to let them go?” I ask, realising the difficult choice between letting the boys have some physical contact and choosing to stop their roughhousing in case someone were to be injured, or a parent complain after the event.

Yep! “Normally,” she said, “You’d have said, ‘Get up! Stop that! One of you will get hurt. Stop it!’” And I let them go, and they stopped. It wasn’t at a high level, and she said, “MESH again!” I said, “Yep!”



Our conversation is interrupted by Kath, who has returned to her office to look for a maths textbook. Kym mentions to Kath how she’s been criticised by another staff member for sharing aspects of her life with her students. Kym tells Kath that she has explained to her colleague that the reason she shared her life with the kids was *to let them know that you don’t have to always be the you-beaut, Level A student to get anywhere. You can have yucky backgrounds and this is what can happen to you.*

Kath’s immediate reaction to Kym’s colleague’s comment is, “Oh there’s a lot of pretentious, bloody idiots around, aren’t there? I mean, I think it’s a bit of an insult. What right’s she got to tell you how to relate to other people – none at all! You can give as much of yourself as you want to, and kids don’t generally abuse it in my experience.”

Over the sound of music blaring from the other side of her thin office wall, Kath explains to me that, “Kym gets herself into trouble with kids ’cos she tells them a lot of stuff and sometimes they misinterpret!” She turns to speak directly to Kym, “But they don’t resent what you say, and you don’t get yourself in trouble because of the way you tell them stuff, it’s where the kid’s at really, isn’t it?” Shifting her gaze back to me, she clarifies the situation as she sees it, “And so sometimes what happens is that Kym’ll give them a whole lot of information, they misinterpret it, then that blows up into something that then you’ve gotta go back and say, ‘No, this is what I was saying.’” She reassures Kym, “But no, the other stuff’s rubbish. But that’s the other person’s problem. That says more about them than you, God Almighty!”

The conversation moves to focus on a real-life example. Kym tells us that Silas, one of her students, has said to her, *“But you don’t know what it’s like to have your parents split up.”* Hearing this, Kath laughs loudly at what she sees as the boy’s obvious lack of

understanding. Kym had said to the boy, *“Tell me.” That’s when I cried, that was the day I got emotional and I said, “My son has not seen his father for how many years?!” and the tears started, and from that day on he looks at me wherever I am, and you can tell [he relates to me differently now], he goes, “Good-day.”*

“That’s right,” says Kath. “Pays you back in spades, doesn’t it!”



“She’s my principal and I’m her teacher”

The relationship between Kym and Kath intrigues me. I describe to Kym how much I’d enjoyed seeing her interaction with Kath during their shared MESH experience. I’d particularly noted how Kath had stood behind Kym at one stage, massaging her neck and shoulders. I am aware that there is a real bond between the two women. Kym explains that *there always probably has been with us, but I couldn’t pinpoint it. And I always knew it here at school, and we’d get that close to starting, but no, she’d go back into professional mode and “phwt” out the door. And I’m sure there’ll still be times at school when I go, “Oh, my God!” but I’ll never forget what we shared at MESH. And respect that, and I look at her and think that was huge, for her to share that [her story] in front of me. She’s one of the most private people⁴ I’ve ever met in my life, and for her to share with me at MESH that, I didn’t think she was gonna share it. There’s no way!*

“Did you know the story?”

Nub. There’s no way I thought she was gonna share that. I knew snippets, of her life. But none of these people here would EVER. I’m probably the only one that’s come that close to seeing that.

“And it surprised you?”

Big time!

I explore the idea with Kym that it may have been equally as hard, if not harder, for Kath as principal to have shared her story in a group with Kym present, as it was for Kym to share her own story with her principal as a member of the group. Kym is aware that the trust issue that she’d talked about earlier is a mutual one.

YE-AH! Oh, yeah, that’s right. And the trust, to know that I’m not gonna come back and say, ‘cos I’m friends with a lot of people here at the school, and mix with them outside o’ school. Like,

⁴ In reviewing this section (because she is mentioned in it), Kath told me that she doesn’t consider herself to be a very private person at all. She thinks that it is “funny” that Kym, and others, think this of her.

alright, we make the pledge⁵ and, yes, we stick to it, but there's always the chance that, you know, [we could break confidentiality] so that was, like you say, as risky for her as it was for me, AND it was an honour, a privilege, I think I tried to sort of share that, say that to her, "I've been here with you," and I, 'cos I know that she knew, when she decided to come with me, and Kath is the sort of person that wouldn't just lightly go, "Yep, righto!" She has thought, "Oh, God, if something comes out, it's gonna be Kym that hears this."

Kym reinforces a comment that Kath made to me about Kath choosing not to socialise with the staff from the school. *The schools that I've been in, I've found her the most distant [principal]. But I'm not disappointed with that. That's the way she chooses to be, and keep things very private. She's a very, very, private, private person. So, that was huge for that [story] to come out over there. And I know how huge it was for her. I think I do.*

In discussing their relationship further, Kym says of Kath: *I feel that she really cares for me. REALLY cares. When she said to me, "Listen, I'll tell you now. There's a job here for you next year," I trust her. And a lot of people have said to me, "Don't." Not because of her, but you just can't do that, but I've always felt that she's like a person of her word. But more so now I feel with her that, I don't know, and she didn't say, and I just looked at her and thought, "You're gonna look after me."*

There's something, we've developed something special, and it's like, yeah, she's a bit of a guardian angel to me, it's like, "Okay, I've been where you've been." And, while Kath has said to Kym, "I don't want to lose you," she has offered to support Kym's application to another high school if she wants a position that has been advertised there – one that may give her permanency. If I went, THEN we would have a different relationship, and I'd ring her, "Rivers, I'm comin' over. Get the kettle on!" And that'll happen one day. I really, that's what I feel. I feel that this was a real base to build things for us for later on. We won't ever mix whilst she's my principal and I'm her teacher. Never. That won't happen. The day will come that she moves on or I move on and that connection will always be there with us. There was a REAL connection [that came out] of MESH, with us, and I always thought it was there but I didn't realise how much until MESH.



Kath and the Assistant Principal, Duncan, *had a meeting the other night and they called me in. "What do you think about this? And what do you think about that?" It's weird. I feel a bit like their off-sider at times.* Kym's high level of involvement in student welfare at the

⁵ The confidentiality pledge that "what is said in group, stays in group."

school sometimes feels at odds, perhaps, with her status as a beginning teacher.

Kath and I have had the most amazing conversations [since MESH]. She actually comes to me – I sort of feel I’m in a bit of a difficult spot, Kym confides. She came into my classroom, into our Grade 8 meeting the other day, there’s three other class teachers, myself and a grade supervisor and an AST3, all for Grade 8, and she said, “Kym, I want you to deal with this kid. You know when we talked about such-and-such at MESH, I want you to do that, right?” and then somebody mentioned another kid, and she said, “Well, I’ve got Kym onto that.”

“And you feel it’s a bit ...?” I don’t finish, not quite knowing how Kym feels.

I don’t mind doing it, but I’m feeling like, “Are the others going, ‘Oh! We’ll get Kym to do that!’” She has worried that snide or sarcastic comments may be being made behind her back by other staff members. She realises, however, that their shared MESH experience means that she and Kath are more likely to be on *one wavelength* when it comes to deciding on the most appropriate way to handle student issues. Additionally, she’s begun to realise that *because Kath and I have talked a lot to other staff about the MESH they’re more accepting of me doing that*. Staff members are aware, too, of Kath’s plans for a whole-staff MESH workshop at the beginning of the following year. *Next year, yeah! I think it’s fantastic. If everybody is willing. But there’ll be a few that won’t be.*

And it’s not my fault that Kath and Duncan keep calling me back ‘n’ saying “We wanna talk to you about a student, and we wanna talk to you about this, and we wanna talk to you about that.” Yeah, the things that I’m seeing in kids that I’ve never seen before and [that’s] all through MESH. *And you couldn’t say which was better – the group work or the lectures – ‘cos they both go together.*



A year after the original MESH PD, however, Kym is more accepting of her new role and her place in helping Kath and Duncan decide what’s best for the students. *There is a benefit to the kids. And they have no hesitation in coming and talking to me and saying, “Do you think this certain student needs a group? What do you think?” Plus the Grade 7 teachers [who are running support groups] come to me and have asked for a bit of advice with their groups, so that’s been good. Yeah, it’s different now. It’s more they [my colleagues] understand now [that they’ve experienced the whole-staff MESH] that I’ve been through two [MESH PDs] and what effect it must’ve had on me.*



About her relationship with Kath, Kym says *I know that people talk about how well we get on, and that's okay. I don't bash myself up for that no more. I just think, "Well, we do!" and that's all there is to it. I think MESH helped, but there was always something there. As far as Kath goes, I feel, what's the word? I'm, not privileged, I feel kinda like honoured that she believes in me and trusts me, and I do believe it goes deeper than [that] she knows I'm good with support. But yeah, she's good value. But the others, it doesn't bother me any more. They stir me and say, "I bet you've been 'round to Rivers." And I just laugh at them. Whereas once it would've worried me, it doesn't any more. But I think they respect that too, and know that we just get on.*



"I would NOT put myself through that!"

Prior to her first MESH experience, Kym had lots of fears and worries, but *since MESH*, she feels that most of her fears have subsided. *I've just got rid of SO much, and so much has happened to me emotionally [that] I'm just exhausted from it, I think. And I know I'm gonna be 'right. It's the best thing that's ever happened. I can't explain it, it's just, nothing matters any more; nothing bothers me. I think that's what's wrong with me, the fact that I'm normally worried about so many things. And I'm just like, she exhales, emulating the process of letting go of her past concerns in a physical manner. Doesn't matter. Nothing worries [me], and I feel like I'm floating along. But I feel, it's, yeah, it's really weird.*

Kym has always been terrified of travelling, especially by air. *I said, 2 months ago, if I won a trip I'd give it away, I wouldn't go. Petrified! I had two friends come back from America recently. I said to Liam, "Why would they do it? I would NOT put myself through that!" We got on a plane to go to Queensland, and I asked them to stop and let me off— like they were going down the runway — 'cos I hyperventilate. Oh, it's cruel! Panic attacks. I panic about things like Liam's going to Hobart today for work, and what if something happens to him. I panic about I'm going to Launceston, "Oh my God! What if something happens to me in the car on the way up? That's it! I'm not going!"*

In Nairn's introduction to the MESH workshop, she mentions how she travelled to America on her Rotary Foundation Group Study Exchange. Nairn always suggests to the group that anyone under the age of 40 should consider applying in the next scholarship round.⁶ *When she was talking about it I thought, I just had this real warm flutter in my stomach and said, "That's for me! I'm going!" We got talking and she said, "I'd love you to*

⁶ 40 years-of-age is the upper age limit for applicants.

go,” and I said, “I want to go.” I told her about all my fears and everything. So then I went home and shared it with Liam, and he was, “Oh, my God! You’ve gotta do it!” and then Friday I was just beside myself.

“You were panicking?” I suggest, but my guess couldn’t be further from the truth.

Nup, Phwtt! I’ll be disappointed if I don’t go! It’s weird! Kym’s fears have subsided. And that was to do with the MESH stuff, so I don’t know. I just know that what’s the point of worrying. If I died tomorrow now, I know Liam would survive and he’s got enough life skills, he’s got everything, he’ll be fine. Of course he’d be sad, but he would say, “Well, this is life,” ’cos that’s Liam. “This is life. Get on with it. Make the best of it.” And [this change in me] it’s been great for Liam, ’cos this is what he’s wanted for so long for me. He just can’t believe the change. He just says, “Oh-ho, look at you!” He sees it physically as well in me. Yeah, loves it! He’s amazed. Amazed.

“So, what does he see physically?”

He just says, “You look different. You don’t look as stressed. You’re not as worried.” Yeah, he sees it here and he says, “Oh, look at you!”

Kym recalls a pre-MESH conversation. *My friend that’s done MESH before, she said, “Oh, you’ll be over the moon with this.” I said, “For goodness sake, Christine, I have been to every spiritual healer in Tasmania just about, every counsellor, every psychic fandangle there is.” But yep, she was right.*



Kym did apply for the Rotary exchange scholarship and participated in the selection interview, on very short notice. As she left school to attend the interview, Kath approached Kym’s car in full view of staff and students leaving at the end of the school day, leaned through the window and gave Kym a hug, telling her she’d do well, and that she’d approve leave from Kym’s teaching so that she could travel. Despite eventually being unsuccessful in being awarded a scholarship, Kym was proud of herself for having summoned enough courage to apply.

Although she missed out on a trip to America, Kym has flown to Melbourne since the PD. *Liam said to me, the morning I was going, “How nervous are you?” And I said, “Ooh, I’m fine!” He’d reminded her about her previous flight and how she’d been anxious for days before, and had almost cancelled her trip. But this time, instead of fear, I was excited! Couldn’t wait! Completely turned around. I mean the thought went through my head at one stage, “What if we crash?” and I thought, “Oh, if we do, we do. Nothin’ I can do!” she laughs.*



Early in 2007, long after formal data generation was complete, I was pleased to receive this e-mail from Kym:

Thanks for your email and lovely thoughts. Back at school today, and excited about this year, I am a grade 7 supervisor, so very excited about that. I've had an awesome holiday. I have been to Thailand for 2 weeks, it was unreal, it was such a spur of the moment decision and [I'm] so pleased it happened. I so have the travel bug now.



“A turning point in my life”

Prior to her first MESH experience, Kym had always been *a social smoker*. Following the lecturette on smoking and other addictions, however, she's reassessed her habit. *I don't know what it is! Last night, I thought, “Nuh! What is it? Why do you do that?” But I didn't make a conscious effort to give up. I just don't need it.*

Kym is pleased to be able to report, a year later, that she has been successful in giving up her addiction to cigarettes. *Never touched another one*, she states, then elaborates on the process further. *I left [MESH] on the Friday, and decided I'd give up, and a couple of days later I gave up and I lasted 2 weeks. And I went back to it, and then I decided, “No. Nuh, that's enough.” All I kept thinking is, “They're a crutch. Why am I doing this?” And I know why. I've worked it all out, why I smoke, and I still get urges to smoke, and I know what brings the urges on and it's all true. It's all about your self.*



The other thing that is probably completely out of left field that I've got out [of MESH is that] I find that my friendship group has changed a little bit, and people don't, some people like, she makes a whistling sound and swiftly brushes her palms together, fingers flaring, away from her, run, because they can't handle the positive stuff. They'll say something about someone, and I'll say, “Oh, you don't know that, maybe they're like ...” and one friend in particular has just moved right away, because she says, “After MESH you stopped smoking, you don't ...” It was like “this, this and this.” And Nairn said, “That's alright. Keep being that, and hopefully she'll come back and she'll get out of it what she needs to,” but no, she's moved right away. Doesn't bother me! I've known her for years. It doesn't bother me. She's been very good to me over the years, like financially, and as a friend, but I just say to myself, “At the time she was good to me, but I also know that I was what she needed in her life, and that's life. You just move on. And there's not

much I can do about it.” There’s nothing I can do about it, and I just don’t bash myself up.

Kym muses further on her MESH experience, the transformation she’s felt, and its meaning to her. *I got so much out of it. I wonder if I’ll keep it up. I really believe that this has been a turning point in my life.*



“And they probably DON’T think that, that’s what I think they think”

Kym reflects on a comment Kath made after introducing us prior to my first interview with Kym. *We walked out of class and Kath said [to you about me], “You won’t offend her,” and I thought, “I [am] offend[ed more] easily than anybody here on this staff!” There are so many things that get said to me that I actually question, but they say it, they think that. I know they don’t do it to offend me, but I take it as, “What’d they mean by that?” Some days more than others, but at the moment I’m really good. I often think people just think because you’re the bouncy, bubbly [person on staff], “Oh God! Here she comes. Isn’t she a rummin?⁷ Look what she’s doin’.” I have often made comment that I reckon they just go and say, “She’s a dickhead. We’ve only got her on staff like ‘cos she’s good for a laugh,” and ‘cos I’m the one that does all the morning tea and the staff fund, and everything else. I often feel like some of the real serious teachers are thinking, “Oh God! I wouldn’t want my kids bein’ taught by her, ‘cos she’s just”*

“You don’t think that they take you seriously as a teacher?”

Yeah, yeah. A lot of them are so intense they can’t even speak of a morning. You can look at them and go, “Good morning,” and it’s, “Look, I have issues,” and I think, “Oh, get a life!” Like they have no idea what it’s like to live in the real world and scrub toilets. Like I mean I’ve probably had about FIFTEEN jobs and you think, “What’re you stressed over, like there’s no NEED to walk in here and not speak!” There’d probably be, I could name about six that wouldn’t speak of a morning, and so if I come in and I’m, “MORNING! How are [you]? What’ve you been [doing]?” and have a bit of a laugh, it’s, “Oh! How could she be? She mustn’t have any lessons to plan. She mustn’t get stressed in class!”

And I’ve heard them at times, and not just [in] this school, and you think, “No, I’ve got a life, and half of them are, you know, never had to struggle for money. They’ve come out of uni that their parents have paid for, rich families, come out first year, good money. Bang! Married another teacher, or another guy on good money, and you think, “You guys!” And I actually want to say to them, like, “Okay, you probably think” and they probably DON’T think that, that’s what I think

⁷ Convict argot for “a fool.”

they think.

So, I just think drama teachers are usually taken that way [by others], art, drama/art, like you hear, “Oh, she’s an art teacher, she’s a drama teacher,” and I guess, as much as I say that, I do that about maths/science. I go, “Oh well, maths/science, very serious!” She laughs at how she falls into the same trap as her colleagues – stereotyping teachers’ personalities by their specialty subject.

By the same token, Kym has recently been made aware of the impact that her personality can have on a school staff. She recalls the farewell staff had for her when she left her job at the primary school. Just recently she’d said to an ex-colleague, *“I still get that card out and read these beautiful compliments you said about me,”* and she has discovered that in some type of school analysis by staff at the primary school, her name was brought up. Her friend had said to her, *“Your personality, your way of being in the school, was mentioned and missed the most,”* and I said, *“Really?”* and she said, *“The boss stood up and said, ‘I wonder if Kym knows just what an impact she’s had on this school.’”*

Based on this feedback from her past workmates, I suggest to Kym that she has been judging herself too harshly, perhaps.

Yeah! That’s what I mean.



With Kym’s new acceptance of herself has come an acceptance of others. *A friend of mine said the other day, she went to sort of be negative about someone. I said, “Oh, look, hey, we just never know.” Like, “Let ’em go.” You find you feel more positive.*

“About people?”

Yeah.

I agree with Kym, but qualify my statement, saying, *“Although, I wasn’t really negative about people to start with.”*

No, but see, I have been at times, she confesses. *So, I’m more positive. I think I see everyone as equal now, like Audrey,* she says, naming a drama teacher from Eucalypt College who had been in Kym’s MESH group. *I would’ve put Audrey up here.* She raises her hand, palm down, horizontally above her head height. *And me down here,* she says, lowering her hand substantially. *Oooh, she was unreal! If I’d gone to Eucalypt College to teach, I would’ve just been [feeling] so inferior. Yeah, I’d have just ran. I’d have bid. I’d have thought, “Oh,*

look at 'er." My defences, when I feel intimidated, it's, "Phwt! Doesn't she love herself!?"

In order to make her self feel more worthwhile, Kym has tended to put other people down. However, since her group experience she's now aware that listening to other people's stories is *EXTREMELY important to be able to help you relate to that person a bit better and have a deeper understanding of maybe why they are like they are. You just see people in a different light once you hear their stories.*

What made some stories so powerful was, *I think, the emotion people felt, and you felt it with them as well, and that they were prepared to share that experience.*



For Kym, having had the chance to share her stories with the group was *good, after a while. It was hard at first, 'cos the hardest thing is nobody speaks, and you're just talkin' and [thinking], "What are they thinking about me?" And at the same time I'm spilling my story, but yeah, it was hard in some way, ah, no challenging because, not hard, challenging because they were strangers, challenging because you had to condense it because they didn't know anything much about you, but it was good. The whole, everything, the way the set-up, closing of the circle and the hands on the shoulders, and the affirmations,⁸ and the BOND, the BOND between these people, and I said to Kath, "You know, you would never hand-pick half these people to be in a group with, and you've got no choice, you get there, and okay."*

Yeah, so that's pretty huge, but yeah, sharing your stories, and there were so many and I never would know, "Oh, God, am I gonna say that, am I gonna tell this?" And then [I thought] "What do I need to get rid of the most and which one do I need to share?" and then I got over that, the second time [at MESH], and just decided whatever comes to my head I'm gonna say.



"I do believe that MESH is like a bit of a miracle"

At our third interview, Kym was able to reflect not only on her first experience of MESH, but also on the whole-staff MESH experience.

⁸ During the affirmations, half the group sits in a circle on chairs with their eyes shut holding A4 sheets on which are typed lists of affirming statements. The remaining members stand on the outside of the circle, facing in. To relaxing background music, people in the outer circle give shoulder massages to the people sitting in the inner circle while whispering affirmations they have chosen from the sheet to them. The people on the outside of the circle slowly make their way around the circle once so that they have given a shoulder massage and positive affirmation to each seated person. Hand contact is always maintained on the people in the inner circle. Inner and outer circle positions are then swapped and the whole process is repeated.

The majority of people wanted to be at MESH. They were a bit, "Oh, God, 3 days. What's this all about?" They found it quite threatening that sort of PD, let alone we'd gone back a day early.

Like they thought they were going along for therapy and it was gonna be disclose like, and they had the wrong idea that it was, some of them, it was about Kath finding out [about them], and it wasn't like that at all. And that's what I say to them, and to the kids, it's not about counselling or therapy, it's just somewhere to talk, somewhere to have a support group.

BUT, after Day 1, I know, a lot of them have said to me, "Oh, God, the first day, I thought, 'This is crap.'" And then they really enjoyed it after that. I've heard feedback such as, "I see people in a different light now," and "Certain staff members I see in a different light because I have heard different things in our group." And so that's been really good. But I just think those, the few, every group seemed like they had one of the negative people in their group, and that was difficult I thought, but there was a few people on staff who've said to me, "Oh, I'd love to go back and do another group."

"So, you think that some of them have changed the way they relate to each other since MESH?"

Yeah, yep, but she qualifies this. They forget. I do believe that MESH is like a bit of a miracle. I think that the AFFECT that it can have on people, individuals, or the affect it had on ME and the way you think, and I've noticed that it does that for other people, BUT they do forget.

"It's easy to slip back into the old ways?"

It's easy, yes. So, it's like you need a little maintenance turn every now and then, just to remember, because it's so easy just, like you say, to slip back into your old ways. BUT, yes, there's a lot that it's had an affect on, and what I've found interesting, one person on staff who I know was against it [the whole-staff MESH training], and SHE refers kids flat out to me.

"Can you say who that is?" I wonder if it is someone I know. I'd had some dissenters in the training group that I'd facilitated at the Oceanview whole-staff MESH training.

Janine Shaw.

"Wow!" I am surprised. "Janine was in my group," and I haven't forgotten that she was one of the more negative group members. For her to now be suggesting that students attend a MESH group is a real back-flip. I feel quite stunned.

Yeah, refers kids to me all the time. Like she didn't like MESH, she wasn't going to disclose a thing. [She had said prior to MESH,] "I'm not sharing with you people. We've been bullied into

coming here.” And she’s the one that says they could do with a MESH group.

Janine is not alone, however. *They’re all very supportive when they say, “Are you doing a MESH group? Have you got a MESH group?” then they’re all very supportive of that. “Oh, good,” so it’s had a positive effect on them.*

And when I say, “Oh, I’m MESHing her,” or “She’s in a MESH group,” they’re “OH! Excellent! That’d be good.”



“And it’s helped me realise what I wanna do”

As had been the intention prior to her attendance at her first MESH PD, Kym has moved into the support role within the school.

I support the teachers in the learning area as well as the emotional area. I’m the first port of call before social [workers] and guidance [officers]. So, if it’s beyond me, I send them there. They have made comments that it’s helped them with their workload because sometimes it’s just a student [who wants] to come and sit in my office and have a cry and I give them a teddy bear and they have a cuddle with that and we have a little bit of a chat, and then I go and catch up with them that afternoon or the next day to see if they’re alright. Then I talk to them about putting them in a group. But, it’s support on a big scale. There was one boy that I wanted him to refer himself, and he said, “No,” [because] he was already seeing the social worker. I said, “This is entirely different and I’d really like you to do it.” And he was absolutely rapt that he did.

A few teachers stir me and say, “You’re not a real teacher,” as a joke, and I used to take that to heart. “What do you do all the time? You’re always wandering.” It’s really strange. Like a lot of the time I’m with Kath and I’m going around classes and checking on kids and making sure everyone’s alright, and it’s just simply observing, like I notice. One girl that I noticed one day looked really sad, and I went up to her and it turned up that I opened a big hornet’s nest and we’ve got her on the road to recovery. Got her in a MESH group. And so supporting the students, emotionally, and with their learning needs, and when they need extra help with curriculum I help out there; help the teachers modify their program.

Kym feels that she is more aware of changes in students’ dispositions since the PD. *Things are MUCH more obvious after doing MESH, much, much more obvious. And basically teachers in the classroom don’t, they see it, they MAY see it, I don’t say they always would, not like I can, because I’ve got the time, but they don’t have the time and yes, so I can just wander into a Grade 9 class and look and think, “Gosh, she doesn’t look too happy.” And [then remember that]*

“Actually yesterday I noticed her walking around on her own.” And yeah, just different things. One girl I noticed kept rubbing her arm, and she’d cover her arm up. Well, she’d been cutting herself. So they’re probably things you don’t notice as a classroom teacher ’cos you’re busy, yeah. I think that, through MESH, I am able to observe things more. And the strategies, MESH has given me heaps and heaps and heaps of strategies, to use, which has been good.

But both [MESH PD training] groups have been REALLY helpful in my job this year. EXTREMELY helpful. And it’s helped me realise what I wanna do, and that’s stay [working] in [student] support. I’ve been back on class for drama and I like that, but I don’t think I can go back as a classroom teacher.

Kym has even felt that, if she is asked to return to classroom teaching after her colleague on maternity leave returns to reclaim the support role, she might even consider leaving teaching. But then, *other teachers have said, “You need to stay in here. You’ve made a difference, and with the MESH groups.” And the feedback I’ve had from my students that’ve been in MESH groups that’ve said at the end, “It’s lovely that you trust us to tell us stories, and we trust you and it’s nice to have someone to go to.” And so I know that’s where I wanna be and I don’t think I’ll leave. I believe that, through MESH, it’s made me believe a bit more in my self and realise that I do have a gift to work with these people and MESH is the way to go. And I actually wanna learn more about it. I do wanna do more MESH groups and learn more about MESH because I just can see that it would keep working.*

From her observation of students whilst facilitating groups, Kym is also aware that simply being present to others in the group is sometimes enough to affect change. *From some of the kids that are “passing” a lot and not disclosing, [not] talking about a challenging situation, as much as they’re not doing that, I’ve seen changes in them and they’ve taken stuff away from it. So they’ve participated in their own head, which has been good. But this last group was the best group I’ve ever had. They don’t mind people knowing they’ve gone to MESH. They wanna do another group. So it’s been really positive in that way. They just said, “Miss Oliver,” they all went round and said when they were saying nice things, “Thank you for trusting me with your story,” and see, I always found that difficult ’cos you didn’t know if they were going to be, you know, disrespectful to you after that. But they all really appreciated and respected that an adult, who’s their teacher, shared something with them. And I noticed that, with the kids, there’s this special bond between us when you meet them in the corridor, it’s just really special, and others have noticed that. And I know there would be a lot of teachers here who would say I’ve gone too far, that you shouldn’t tell them, but I do, and I believe that’s why the groups are so successful.*

[Also,] I'm a bit more relaxed, so I'm able to step back and not get stressed. The effect it's had mostly is the way I can relate to the kids and I'm just able to turn around and, whereas once I'd have been, "Oh, my God! What's wrong with that kid? Why are they like that? Sour-faced little thing!" And [now] I just think, "Hey, you never know what's underneath all that," you know. There's a reason why they're like it. Yeah.



"I look at everyone else and think they're perfect"

Kym had talked in our first interview about how she's always lacked self-esteem. "When we talked last time, it seemed like you were intimidated by some people, and felt you were 'less than' them," I remind Kym of our earlier conversation.

I do, she says, but quickly corrects herself. *I did! Don't any more. Nup! Nuh. It's AMAZING, and the conversations I've had with a few people here that I'd never normally, because I always felt less than them, it's just BIZARRE.*

It is clear that the MESH group experience has been a normalising one for her. Listening to the stories of the other group members has allowed her *to see them in a different light. You'd realise that every, single person, we're all human and we all have feelings, and you can't judge a book by its cover. GOD! There's so many people out there that come across as, oh, I'd be intimidated by them, normally, but my God, they've got just as much baggage and been through crap just as much as anyone else.*

And, at times when she struggles to maintain high self-esteem, Kym is able to recall aspects of her time at MESH and find reassurance. A comparison she had made between herself and another high school drama teacher at the beginning of her MESH experience was particularly enlightening to her, providing a touchstone experience. *I had put myself down, and still tend to, and I look at everyone else and think they're perfect. And they've got perfect lives. And, to listen to other stories, I'll never forget, you know, Audrey Powell walkin' in, and she's got the husband that's the Mayor and he's good looking, and she's gorgeous and she's got all this jewellery and she looks fantastic, and she's a better drama teacher than me, and I bet she thinks I'm useless. And then for her to turn around and she feels the same way about herself as what I do. No, not entirely, but in the same context, and looks at other people, and didn't think for a million years that I was not confident. And that happens all the time, it's the reassurance that you get from it, too. Listening to other people's stories reassures you, and then the feedback they give you! And it makes you think, "Oh, gee, wow! This is the way people do*

look at me.” And I know, if I meet someone and think, “Oh, what’re they thinkin’ of me?” and then I think back to [my experience at] MESH and think, “No, hang on! How many of those people all said positive things about you? So stop!” It just makes you realise that you’re your [own] worst enemy. Because you’re the only one that puts yourself down.

It was very powerful, that at the end, that certificate, with all the one word. OH! That was powerful, to sit there and have one person, then each person say something about you:

An absolute delight
Gorgeous
Kevvvvvv⁹
Unique
A white chocolate Lindt Easter egg
Absolutely fabulous
Comic relief
Special
Looney tunes
Just great
Courage
Dynamic.

And the affirmations that went around, very spiritual, the way they jump out at you.¹⁰ Ooh! That was unreal. Yeah, I just found it all pretty FAN-tastic.

What people said to me there, people’ve been saying to me for a long time, but there I believed it. And I knew it wasn’t just lip service. I believed it because I learnt to believe it about my self too.

⁹ Reference to the character, “Kev” (short form of Kevin), played by Kym in the family sculpture role-play.

¹⁰ By saying “the way they jump out at you,” Kym refers to the way that some affirmations appear to be the appropriate messages to give to particular people.

Chapter 6

Geoff Murray

"I'm a strange attractor"

Geoff Murray originally began crafting his home from the rock and wood of Tassie's north west during his long service leave. *Michael Field*¹ and his redundancies came in. And then the idea of finishing the house without a mortgage, bloody, yeah, it sounded wonderful at the time. Never worked o' course. The construction that he had planned would take 2 years to complete, quickly turned into 3, and the cost of building doubled.

Set just below the brow of a hill on a lush 5-acre block overlooking farmlands and forest, his home is earthy and solid, much as I've found Geoff to be. His solidity, however, is something that is metaphorical rather than physical. From his rough beard and tanned, weathered facade, to his "roll-your-own fags" and hand-knitted, natural woollen jumper, his appearance is more that of a "bushie"² than a teacher. In my imaginings, I picture Geoff reining in a team of bullocks hauling giant eucalyptus logs through stands of ancient sclerophyll forest, rather than in a classroom. But that might sell him short.



"It's a sexist thing"

I feel rather envious of the height of Geoff's kitchen benches as I stand beside him drying dishes while he washes. My own sink is set back-achingly low and uncomfortably-far forward. Like someone accustomed to the task, he has already seasoned and set the silverside to simmer and peeled and cut up the vegies for his

¹ Labor Premier of Tasmania, 1989-1992. Field's minority coalition (Labor-Green) government oversaw the implementation of a systemic review and reform (known as CRESAP) of the Department of Education and the Arts in 1990. A cut of \$18m in Tasmania's education budget resulted in staffing cuts of approximately 10% (Macpherson, 1994).

² A person, usually unsophisticated, who lives in the bush (Bushie, 2003)

family's evening meal. He finishes the dishes and boils the jug, offering me a mug of green tea. Outside, heavy rain drains clouds black to the horizon as we settle neighbour-like into the snug warmth of deep, old-fashioned armchairs. And I begin to learn a little of Geoff, his life, and his work.

Geoff began teaching in 1979 as a primary school teacher on a departmental scholarship. However, when planning for a career in teaching, his preference had been elsewhere.

I actually wanted to do kindergarten teaching, but I was terrified, being a male, back in 1974, that if I applied to do kindergarten teaching they wouldn't let me, 'cos no-one did. Not males, they didn't. So I applied to do primary teaching because at the end of every year, your first year you did a prac, and then at the end of that you had to, you know, decide. There was an election during the year, Gough³ went, Malcolm⁴ came in, there was no money for the whole campus at the time, so the prac got cancelled.⁵ We never got to choose. So, primary teaching it was, he laughs. So being a male, of course, that meant Grade 5/6 teaching, and I HATE things like that.

"It MEANT that, did it, it was just?" I falter, a little taken aback. I am well aware of the struggles of some peers – male pre-service teachers wishing to enter a career in early childhood teaching – but hadn't realised that the system had, at one time, been prejudiced against them making such a choice for themselves at all.

Because I was a male. Presumed I was just 5/6, yeah. Well, perhaps it was more an implied rule than one which was written.

Later, Geoff and his wife, Linda, a primary school teacher, spent 2 years travelling overseas: *we went to Hawaii, then to Hollywood, spent 3 or 4 months in South America, and then flew to London, spent about 18 months based in London, and then came back through Egypt, and Greece and India.*

"Fantastic!" I responded, impressed by the diversity of destinations. David and I had married early in 1979, the year before Geoff and Linda, and immediately travelled to New Zealand. We'd spent 2 months hitch-hiking from north to south, and the remainder of the following 2 years, living and working in Queenstown, on the South Island of New Zealand. Since we were living in a different country, away from family

³ Gough Whitlam, Labor Prime Minister of Australia, 1972-1975.

⁴ Malcolm Fraser, Liberal Coalition Prime Minister of Australia, 1975-1983.

⁵ I was originally sceptical of this claim, however I had it substantiated by a colleague who had studied for her undergraduate degree at this time.

and friends, it had meant that we'd had to rely almost entirely on each other; a bonding experience as newlyweds. Our adventures endowed us with many shared memories.

Had about 3 months in India on the way home, finishes Geoff, breaking into my reverie. They'd had a complete break from teaching, managing to pick up bar work in London, living in hotels in which they'd worked.

On their return to Tasmania, Geoff was given a posting to Southbanks Primary and, once again, he remembers feeling miffed because he *was automatically given the Grade 6, and then, I can still remember meeting Kent Foley, the principal, in the car park. I said, "If I win the," I can't remember if it was cricket or football, "If I win the Grand Final next week, can I have a Grade 3 next year, please?" "Ubr, ubhrr, ubhrrr, I'll think about it,"* Kent stumbled, possibly surprised at Geoff's unusual request. *Anyway, I got it; it was a Grade 4.*

Despite the fact that he'd had to wager his way into his much longed-for venture into an earlier grade, and although *it wasn't a Grade 3*, as he'd requested, Geoff felt that he had taken an important first step towards working in his preferred area of the school. To Geoff's delight, in his final 2 years, while teaching at Mossvale, *the message got through*, and he'd finally been given a younger class; *a Grade 2/3. It's a sexist thing, and as I said, I hate that sort of stuff.*



"I'm a very selfish person"

As well as studying teaching, Geoff *also spent a year at TAFE ⁶ in '95 or '6 doing the Community Services [Course] which was all about empathy and learning to listen to people, and all the things they NEVER teach you as a teacher.* His comment brings about shared laughter at this irony. *And the difference to the things I learnt as a teacher on how to handle people, compared with Community Services, it was just a different paradigm, as they say. It was just completely different. Teachers aren't told to listen to their kids! They're told to talk to them, and tell them what to do, and make sure they do it.* Then he adds, almost as an afterthought, that his TAFE course also covered *how to get your way without having to use power and bullying.*

Geoff's comments prompt me to think about how important healthy and positive teacher-student relationships are to effective teaching.

⁶ Technical and Further Education.

Then, Geoff describes to me his work placement for his TAFE course. *I did a prac for that course working with this 10-year-old at Sandpiper and he was – and here he has quite a chuckle to himself – a very good test of all I'd learned, I can tell you. He was in the situation where he had assaulted three teachers, wrecked a classroom and scared the livin' daylights out of all his classmates. He had his 2 or 3 weeks off, and he was coming back and the school was at a loss [as to] what to do with him. So basically, I was his teachers' aide, if you like, for 10 weeks.*

As a result of his prac placement, a contact that Geoff had made at Support Services had led to a job at West Sandpiper Primary School as the Behaviour Support Teacher. *It was a fairly violent school, especially at recess and lunch time, and my job was to do something about it. And I worked there for a day [a week] the first year, and half a day [a week] the second year, but the difference was phenomenal. And all I really did, literally, was walk around lookin' for trouble, and then, when I found it, I sorted it.*

Geoff also described to me the parenting groups he'd helped to run with the social worker from Anglicare.⁷ Together, they had recruited a small group of parents whose children he described as *diabolical, basically*. Over a period of several weeks, Geoff and the social worker ran afternoon sessions aimed at giving these parents skills and strategies that would help them to be able to deal with their children's behaviour. *Just parenting, they haven't got any idea. And it's getting worse. So, what I'm saying is [that I am keen to learn] anything that I can learn that can help me help these people. The other thing I'm really interested in is helping children to be able to be successful members of the class instead of wrecking it.*

“Mm, that'd be good, wouldn't it?” I respond.

Casually, at what seems to be a natural break in our conversation, I glance at the mist that's enveloped the world outside the window and wonder aloud whether it is raining at home. Following my gaze to the wall of windows, Geoff explains the presence of fibre-board where one pane is missing: *Alex has busted about seven, I reckon, in his football and cricket career so far. That's the cricket pitch though, so there's no point in fixing it at this stage*, he comments. I feel his attitude contrasts wonderfully with the conversation we've just been having about children wrecking classrooms. I am impressed by the way Geoff has prioritised his son's sporting interests and accepts the pointlessness of repairing the window at any time in the near future.

⁷ Anglicare Australia is the national network of care and social justice agencies of the Anglican Church in Australia working within Australia. Anglicare Tasmania is independent from, but associated with, Anglicare Australia.



Geoff's working week, when I first interview him, is a little surprising to me, because it is consistent only in its variety.

*On Mondays I do relief.*⁸ *Tuesdays I do my job at West Sandpiper Beach with Equity into Work.* *Wednesdays I'm at Norton [College], lookin' after m' Aboriginal students, running the ASPA Committee*⁹ *and stuff.* *Thursdays relief.* *Fridays is a half day at Wombat Flats Primary School.* *And I've done DIFFERENT things there.* Geoff continues, describing to me how Community Services had placed him with six boys whom he depicts as having gone through the time-out book. *These six boys were the most in trouble.* He tells me of his involvement in an alternative program at the school, in which, *TOGETHER with four adults, me and these six kids we wrote and filmed a video over a period of about 5 or 6 weeks.* Since then he's been *workin' with this one boy, number one, I think, to give him and the class and the teacher all a rest from each other. One on one, as most of these kids are, he's absolutely perfect.* Geoff believes that he sees a different side to some of these students than do their classroom teachers, especially when working with them in programs involving the community.

Working on another project, Geoff helped the six students build *one go-kart and then me and [the other boy] built another go-kart.* *Then another fella who grew up just down the road here who just happens to work in the spray-painting place over the road, he took it home and spray-painted it for us, and now we're raffling it to raise some more money to go and do something else.* Geoff is also planning to give this boy *some extra visits to the high school he's going to go to next year, and introduce him to some people I know there and try and ground him a bit before he goes, otherwise he'll wreck the bloody place!* he finishes with a laugh.

Certainly, for Geoff, *the most stress-free day of the whole week* is Tuesday. On this day he supervises *two fellas with some sort of mental impairment.* Mostly, they spend their time removing "sea spurge" (*Euphorbia paralias*), an invasive weed, from the coastal dunes and beaches in the area and carting it to the local tip. At other times, if the weather is favourable, they *literally count penguin tracks, from the Fairy Penguins.* 'Cos there's a lady at Norton doing research on that, y'see. In spring, there is also lawn mowing, and, at other times of the year, they find other maintenance work to do. When the weather is

⁸ Relief teaching is when teachers act as a substitute teacher for a classroom teacher who is absent due to illness or having to perform other duties. This is elsewhere referred to as "supply" teaching.

⁹ Aboriginal Student and Parent Association, where Geoff ran meetings with students and parents, usually over lunch.

inclement, as it is on the day of our first interview, Geoff sometimes has the day off paid work, and then he spends his day working on projects at home.



Ten months later and in the following calendar year, Geoff's work arrangements have altered. His work with the two young men has been discontinued due to a lack of funding and the impact of a severe nationwide drought. His week now consists of relief teaching in early childhood, primary and college classes, and support teaching, mainly in the classroom setting, with students who have special needs.¹⁰

So, Monday, Tuesday, Friday, I'm relief teaching. And Wednesday, and Thursday morning, I'm at Devil's Ridge Primary School as a support teacher.

"So, what do you do in the support role?"

There's three boys in prep who've got Asperger's Syndrome, or somewhere on the autism spectrum, and I support them. There's a boy [in Grade 5] with Down's Syndrome. I spend a lot of time with him. [Also in Grade 5] there's a boy who came from another school with TERRIBLE behavioural problems, and, because he's in a new atmosphere and we KNEW what to expect, he hasn't been in a fight, he's increased his enrolment, he's gone from 2 half-days to, I think he's doing 1 full-day and 4 half-days now. He also mentions working one-on-one with another Grade 5 student who has Cerebral Palsy.

Instead of working with more Aboriginal students – a job he has looked forward to – the position he has held for 6 years has become *an Aboriginal-designated position, which I'm not, so*. He is sorry that his work with the Aboriginal students has come to an end, believing that, after so long in the position, *you sort of get the run of the place and you know what goes on, and you can be more effective if you've been there for a while*. In his habitually stoic manner, however, he follows this by saying, *But, I also like the new job at Devil's Ridge too, so I haven't got any complaints.*



After our lengthy discussion about the type of students and others he's assigned to work with, and the variety and intensity of his work, I am a little taken aback when Geoff describes himself in what I initially think of as less-than-flattering terms. *I'm a very selfish person*, he says. But then, in explaining himself further, the way in which he's

¹⁰ This term refers to students who are developmentally different and/or behaviourally troubled or challenging.

used the descriptor makes perfect sense to me. *I think you need to be a very selfish person if you want to be able to help other people. If you don't know what you want, and you don't do it, how can you help other people get what they want when they don't know what they want? It's always driven my wife crazy, but I've ALWAYS said that one of the most important things in the world if you're going to help other people is to be utterly and entirely selfish.*

Geoff is perceptive in his realisation that possession of good self-knowledge is essential as a foundation for any work with others in helping them to understand themselves.¹¹



“What’s this all about?”

At one school in which Geoff had been working, the principal had asked him *to run a weekly workshop with all the worst boys, in a room, together, doing things, and it just didn't fit, didn't suit, I didn't think it was feasible, number one, and I don't think it's a good idea to put all the worst behaved kids together in one room for any reason, unless it's a whole school assembly, and CERTAINLY not all boys, and certainly no-one else. My heart wasn't in it. I didn't think it would work. We had worksheets we went through and all this stuff, but it was FALSE if you like, and it was FAKE. It didn't feel right.*

And then, one day Geoff opened his e-mail inbox and found an advertising flyer sent by Nairn Walker to Department of Education employees in a bulk mail-out. He liked what he'd read about the MESH workshop, believing that what was on offer would fit well with the work he was doing in schools and in his community. *What I'm hoping that this MAY do, he explains prior to his attendance, is that if I was [ever] in a similar situation [again] I would have a program that, number one, I believed in and was committed to, and number two, might work in that situation.*

Planning ahead, he also thought that the PD may help him obtain a position as a behaviour support officer within a school cluster.¹²

Although he didn't know a lot about what the program entailed, Geoff was seeking strategies that might assist him in working with students in his care. *I know it's to do*

¹¹ A sentiment very closely aligned with those of Jersild (1954, 1955) and Satir (Intelligence in Satir, 1978, pp. 36–37).

¹² Clusters were the way in which the Department of Education organised groups of schools for resource funding purposes at the time of the interview reported. The organisation of the department has since changed.

with helping people who need help. And there's all those words on the sheet that came out about resilience and suicide prevention et cetera, which is probably what attracted me 'cos that's the sort of work that I like. I enjoy helping people who need it. Basically. And, in a lot of cases, I seem to be able to do it. But, he chortles, *what's this [course] all about?*

“So, it’s intrigued you a little bit?” I query, choosing not to answer what I judge from Geoff’s tone to be a rhetorical question.

Mhmm. And I will do anything that will help me do my job, yeah.



Geoff had previously attended a national conference on suicide prevention, describing this as the sort of thing he loved doing. And, earlier that year, he’d accompanied the local *police lady* at Norton College to another workshop in rural Victoria which was aimed at supporting secondary schools in promoting and protecting social and emotional well-being. *I enjoyed it, but I didn’t learn a lot, I think would be the way I’d put it.* He clarifies this response by adding, *I didn’t think they had a clue about suicide prevention, not a clue, and the other thing that annoyed me was they were too scared to talk about it. The lady running it just avoided it.* And this avoidance he found frustrating.

As Geoff has mentioned suicide three times within a short space of time, I am curious to find out why he has an interest in this particular topic. “You’ve mentioned suicide a few times. Why suicide? Do you see that as a big issue?”

Ab, no, not really, but working at Norton, I suppose, he answers, reminding me that at the college Geoff is working with senior students; those in Grades 11 and 12, where students might be perceived as being at more risk of suicide.



One of the testimonials in the MESH flyer he had seen was written by a teacher friend of Geoff’s. *So, I haven’t literally talked to Genevieve about MESH, but I do know the work Genevieve does and I do know what a terrific job she does. She does a wonderful job, and there’s a TRIBE of kids with behaviour disabilities at [her school], a TRIBE of them.*

Geoff has one primary concern prior to attending the workshop. *I’m not a morning person,* he confides in me, and the thought of *leavin’ me warm bed before 7:00 in the morning does not appeal one bit!* I laugh, amused by his frankness.

He adds, as an afterthought, that after reading the timetable for the 3 days, he'd exclaimed to his friend, Briony, that the workshops were *something like 9 bloody hours a day! They've gotta be joking! I can't work 9 hours a day! M' body won't!*

Briony, who had previously attended a MESH workshop, had replied, "Geoff, you'll find you don't have enough time. Don't worry about it."



As I had felt during my own initial group experience,¹³ Geoff was *just a bit sus about the first [MESH group] session*. However, by the time the 3 days were over, Briony had been proven right. Geoff is keen to let me know that *not at any stage did I find the time dragging at all. Not once. I was thoroughly enjoying it*. He liked the mix of different people in his group – four social workers from a young women's shelter and two personnel officers from a large corporation – finding that despite the different work-related roles, *we're all the bloody same, aren't we, let's face it. I was really pleased with the way I was able to relate to the other people in the group. Once you reach that certain level of communication well then just everybody's, you know, they're basically nice people, doesn't matter what's happened to 'em*.

And being the only male in the group didn't concern him, either. *I was a primary school teacher, you see. And there's not many male primary school teachers, there weren't back then, and if there were they were usually the principal, not teachers. And I've never really had a problem relating to women, anyway. I don't see them as being entirely different at all really.*



His engagement with the members of his group made it easy for Geoff to recommend MESH to his colleagues. He recalls that upon his return to school he'd said to them, *"It's wonderful. Do it!"* And, nearly a year later, when I speak with him at our final interview, his opinion about the value of the course to teachers and students hasn't changed. He still believes that *they should be doing MESH, or they should be offering it to students, because it makes them look at what's important and what's not in human relationships, and a lot of the stuff that's on the surface seems to be important, it isn't at all*.

"Mm. So it refocuses their thinking about that, perhaps?"

Mm. And we talked about the fact that, I think it's changing, thank heavens, but a lot of teaching in the past has been about the teacher talking and the children listening. Whereas learning's more about everybody being involved and with the MESH everybody's intimately involved. So there

¹³ See Prologue, p. 1.

MUST be learning taking place, there MUST be.



“It keeps coming back to this connecting, but ... at a different level”

I think MESH is a good thing, Geoff says, before clarifying his support by according physical and relational benefits to self-disclosure within a safe environment.

Well I think it's wonderful that people have a chance in that sort of atmosphere to OFFLOAD stuff they've been trying to deal with on their own for years and kept to themselves. That will probably save them getting cancer or having a stroke or something. And the fact that you can put eight strangers together in a group for 3 days; they end up, well, not going away life-long friends, because that's not true, but, the similarities with the information they've got on each other, it sort of makes you like that. I could run into any of those ladies at any time, and we could sit and chat and it wouldn't be a problem. We wouldn't HAVE to go through all the SURFACE stuff which we do in a lot of our relationships, 'cos we don't know the people any better. And I think all this is good, making all these connections, obviously. Mm.

Story, Geoff believes, is important in learning, 'cos it makes it relevant. If someone's been through a personal situation and it had a great effect on them, it's possible for other people to learn from that without having to go through that experience, which, let's face it, is a hell of a lot better way to learn, than having to go through the experience.

“So, you think people do actually pick up on those, the storyline and the message of the story?” I ask.

Yes, and the humanness; the fact that we are all connected, by not necessarily the same experiences, but the same sort of life experiences – we all have problems, we all have to get through things, we all have stages in our life that are very difficult, and we all have issues – some of them happen to us when we don't have any power, which are probably the worst.

It keeps coming back to this connecting, but connecting at a different level. When it's all set up so there's only the small group of people and they know that what they're gonna say is gonna be listened to, number one, and it's not gonna be told to the rest of the world, number two, then the things that are REALLY either have affected people or are bugging them, they'll talk about.

Two complete strangers if they talk at a deep enough level, find that they have this huge connection, because life is the same for all of us in some respect or another. And I think it's getting at that commonness of the life experience, even though you get it through different situations, it's

ALWAYS the same things that come out as being important. And being able to talk to someone, trusting someone, having a positive relationship with someone, all these things we talk about blithely, blindly, when you get down to it, they're absolutely true. They're so important in someone's life.

Geoff also acknowledges the importance of reciprocity in building a climate in which trust grows and stories can be shared within the group. *If someone sat there with their arms folded the whole time and refused to tell a story, I think the people who were telling their stories, they'd either, say, ignore the person, or they'd start to feel very uncomfortable and want them out of the group, I reckon. I thought we all talked away and listened to each other without any stress, other than in the stories, I don't think the group made any stress for itself at all. Quite the opposite.*

When you relate to people, if you can relate to them at a deep level like that, it's like you know them somehow, or they don't scare you any more.

I tend to tell people things, and I find that telling people things lessens the control over the whatever it is that's getting at you. The power it has over you lessens in the telling. Mm. Geoff is shrewd, though, because he understands that one of the hard things to learn in life is you can't go telling everything to everyone, he laughs. You need to be taught, or you need to learn that there are only certain situations that you can do this stuff and do it so that it's of benefit to everybody.

I ask whether Geoff can identify for me the features that he believes make some stories powerful as a means of developing understanding or learning.

I think a lot of it's the emotion involved, and the way the small group situation is set up and you're all in a circle and you're all facing each other, you've got to get involved; you've got no choice.

"Haven't you?" I ask. I'm conscious that, because of the nature and depth of the sharing in the group sessions, some people may feel compelled to self-disclose beyond their comfort level, despite the oft-repeated guideline reminding them, explicitly, of their "right to pass," and to only disclose what they feel comfortable sharing.

No! I don't think so. Well, I'm sure some people could turn off, but I don't think they're the sort of people that I could get on well with. And here he gives his characteristic, hearty laugh. But no, yeah, when they tell the stories, it's obviously a big part of them, isn't it? With the way they're told and the sincerity and everything, and you know it's really happened, however bad it is, and then you, other people, can empathise with them. And it's not a matter of being sorry for them either, but just accepting the fact that they've been through something terrible and if they happen to have got out the other side, well, they're obviously better people for it.

“They’re the lucky ones,” I comment.

Mm.



“If you’ve got unresolved issues, you put up defences”

Geoff describes himself as having been a very placid child – one of a family of five children. Usually, when Geoff’s mother was organising to leave the house, she would *plonk* Geoff in the open doorway while she gathered the other children together. And he would stay plonked. One of his brothers, though, was far less manageable and exhibited an aggressive nature from an early age.

I had a few fights in primary school and high school, but I never started any of them. But having, as I said, this aggressive brother, I could fight fairly well, so I don’t think I ever lost one. But I could never hit anyone either. I just used to throw ’em on the ground and sit on ’em.

After laughing at Geoff’s tactics, I suggest to him that, “You don’t look like you’re weighty enough to win a fight that way.”

Oh, I was! Don’t you worry about that! And I was fairly strong, and I was also fairly fast, but I didn’t have an aggressive bone in m’ body, no.

Geoff recalls the family sculpture¹⁴ role-play on the second afternoon of the workshop. Of the six family members portrayed in the role-play, he played the part of the rebellious child, choosing the name James. However, in reflecting back on his childhood, he reaffirms his passive nature, saying that he was *the exact opposite, the quiet one in the corner with the book. No-one even really noticed.*

“I thought you might have been the rebel,” I say, recalling both the political nature of some of Geoff’s comments to me, as well as his convincing performance before the long, blue velvet curtains billowing weightily in the warm afternoon breeze at the Mt Arthur Centre.

Geoff recalls that following the role-play there had been a discussion during which *Nairn talked about [people being] well-balanced and [whole].*¹⁵ *Well I’ve certainly got that [wholeness], don’t worry, but I’ve got a fair bit of rebel in me.* This rebelliousness he attributes

¹⁴ An interactive role-play of a dysfunctional family based on the family systems’ work of Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse (Wegscheider-Cruse, 1987a, 1987b, 1989).

¹⁵ Meaning that they are able to integrate or accept all the archetypal parts of who they are as a person – the quiet part, the angry part, the funny part, the responsible part.

to an Irish Catholic heritage, saying that his family had been *intimately involved with the bloody church, whether we wanted to or not. And I was a good little altar boy.*

His shared memory brings my own memories flooding back. I recall the smell of incense as dear old Father Murphy swung the thurible back and forth before himself as he trod slowly down the aisle of Saint Thomas More's Church on the occasional Sundays when I'd gone with my father, grandmother and sisters to attend mass. My parents' marriage was a "mixed marriage" of the time, my mother having resisted her mother-in-law's "suggestion" that she convert to Catholicism before marrying my father. Geoff continues with his own memories:

And on a Wednesday afternoon I went to a funeral, in m' altar boy gear, and everything was hunky-dory, and the priest said, "Thank you." I went to a wedding the following Saturday, and got LAMbasted after the wedding because I had a hole in m' slipper. And on the way home, this is when I'm 11, on the way down the highway, I thought, "If the slipper with the hole in it's good enough for a funeral but it's not good enough for a wedding, you're talking shit! And I'm out of here," and resigned. That was m' altar boy days. Over!

I'd had a similarly disenchanting early encounter with one of God's earthly representatives during a religion lesson in Grade 5 or 6. We'd been taught about "limbo," the place where many traditional Catholics believe that the souls of the good go to await entrance to heaven. I clearly remember Sister Angela telling the class that, because of the "stain of original sin," the souls of unbaptised babies would remain forever in limbo, never being permitted entry to heaven.¹⁶ Shocked at what I believed to be an injustice, I timorously asked whether this applied even to "the little black babies born in deepest, darkest Africa where the missionaries haven't been yet." At her confirmation of my fears, I remember thinking that no just God could allow such a dreadful thing to occur. This religious discrimination was a defining moment in my life. I'd already had trouble accepting my teacher's advice that true faith meant that I shouldn't question other doctrinal issues which I'd found difficult to understand and accept. And now I lost any faith I did have over what I believed to be an awful inequity. I remember this event as my first outside-of-family social justice issue.

¹⁶ More recently, "Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), ... said that the church does not know the fate of unbaptised infants, but advised Roman Catholics to trust in God's mercy and love. Most Traditional Catholics, though, believe in its existence" (Limbo, 2006, September 2).



The information presented on the dysfunctional family system, and the archetypal characters believed to be created by such systems,¹⁷ was new to Geoff. He was a little shocked by *the repetitiveness of it. The fact that you can see 'em [people who express the distinct archetypal characters] everywhere, and you can, you know. That's cause for thought.*

The lecture and the role-play had provided Geoff with insights into some of his students, one boy in particular. Since the workshop, he has planned a special program for the Grade 8 student and is intending to sit and talk to the boy about his behaviours, the choices he is making, and giving him an opportunity to talk. He has already established that this student is willing to speak to one of the high school counsellors, *and he'll have on-going support, 'cos getting the first change is really easy, yeah, and the longer you can get 'em to go without a lapse [in behaviour], 'cos you know they will, but the longer that period is [the better], so that you get rid of the habits. These kids put up these defences. And that's something new [I've learned from MESH]. If you've got unresolved issues, you put up defences.*

Geoff has written a report, and has listed six behaviours the boy is exhibiting; behaviours he now recognises as the boy's defences. *That's what they are. You see, that's why I was so pleased. I couldn't have done that before the MESH. He's not doing that for any other reason. He's doing it because he's got very low self-esteem. He's got low self-esteem because his Dad doesn't want anything to do with him, and he's got no-one to talk to about it.* Geoff has used his knowledge of the boy's home life to reason his way through the factors he now believes to be impacting on the boy's behaviour.

To Geoff's mind it's very important that *once you start something with these people, you've gotta keep doin' it.* His comment reminds me of the PowerPoint slide Nairn uses during the lecture on defences,¹⁸ and how she stresses the importance of adults not giving up on their attempts to help young people who have built up defensive barriers. Many of these young people seem determined to push away adults who try to assist them, and, when the adult finally gives up trying, this confirms for the young person that they were right not to trust the adult in the first place. For the adult this can be extremely frustrating, and very tiring, work, and yet, like Geoff, many people find it

¹⁷ The archetypal characters, or family roles, are addict, enabler or co-dependent, the hero or perfect child, rebel or scapegoat, lost child, and clown or mascot, although there are others (Wegscheider-Cruse, 1987a).

to be intrinsically rewarding.

Geoff believes that MESH has the potential to contribute to a healthier social environment for both teachers and students. *I still think there is a huge place for it [MESH] in primary schools. A huge place for it in colleges. And I don't know much about high schools, as you know, but I'm sure it would take a lot of stress off a lot of teachers if they could get these MESH groups going. And sort out a lot of these [students'] problems in the group situation and then they wouldn't walk around with them and take them out on everybody all the time. I think it'd be great.*

Geoff's newly-developed understanding of the link between unresolved issues and student behaviour is useful in his work with students. *These kids, the aggressive behaviour, the abuse of the teachers, the punching of people, is all defence. The defences just get bigger. Which is why the Pink Floyd, "Brick in the wall." You just build up more [bricks/ defences], you see? But if someone can knock the wall down, and give you a fresh start, which is what I had to do with this kid. And, the hardest thing with behaviour modification is the people who've dealt with this kid for years and know what he HAS been like can't treat him in a different way when the behaviour starts to change.*

And the weird thing about that is, if somebody had've talked to this person, as a person, in the first place, all of this might've been avoided. It was like this boy could tell me yesterday, perfectly. He could tell ME perfectly who he wanted to talk to at school. But why did he tell me within half an hour of knowin' 'im, meetin' him, when he's been in this school for nearly 2 years?

*See, it's been a belief of mine for a long time that you can't be a teacher in a school and work with these at-risk kids successfully, not because you mightn't have the skills, but because of the baggage you bring with you because you're a classroom teacher. And, in a sense, a complete stranger who can make a connection, which I did with this kid really easy, 'cos he went through Wellington,¹⁹ and me old mate, Evie, teaches at Wellington, he laughs. But this is interesting. Geoff, in his characteristically ardent manner, knocks several times on the table to emphasise the importance of what he is about to say. *The teacher that he got on best with, and had the most respect for, at Wellington, was Evie, because she treated him as a person. Not as a kid or a student or anything else, just as a person. It's a basic human need, I reckon.**

Reacting to the defences is exactly what [teachers] do. They react to them. Instead of seeing them for

¹⁸ The text of the slide read: "I live inside a shell, that is inside a wall, that is inside a fort, that is inside a tunnel, that is under the sea, where I am safe, from you, and if you really loved me you'd find me."

¹⁹ A local school where the students have a reputation for exhibiting challenging behaviour.

what they are. They don't know what to DO. And that's what the MESH is so good for.

When people deal with people, they treat the reasons, the defences, the violence and the aggression, right, and it gets them nowhere and they don't understand why. Whereas if they stop everything, sit down, and say, "There's a reason you're behaving like this. What is it?" That's what we need to find out. That's progress.



"I – will – interfere – physically"

Geoff had mentioned during our first interview, and at MESH, the aggressive nature of his older brother. I am interested to explore a connection between Geoff's biography and his current work, so I ask him whether he believes that his brother's behaviour has influenced his own ability to deal with aggressive students, for whom he seems to have a high level of tolerance.

Oh, DEFINITELY! YES! Mm. Aggression is power. People use it 'cos it works, but if you just stand there and laugh at them it doesn't, you see?

I can't help but laugh, "You don't get snotted?" I query Geoff, using a colloquial term for being punched in the nose.

Nuh, never! Mind you, if I'm working with boys, I go out of my way to be as fast, strong, quick. Or, not as good as, better! Beat them that way.

"A show of manliness?" I query, interested in what seems a rather unique approach to dealing with difficult or aggressive students.

You have to! Or they will snot you. And I talk to them, you know, make the violence rules as clear as a bell. "The only time I will touch you is if you hurt, or look like you're going to hurt, anyone else, whether it's me or another kid, or a teacher. I – will – interfere – physically. Do you understand? I will. I'm mean." And I do. But not very often do I have to. But I do. I never had to learn that, because of m'brother.



I HATE using power over any kids at all, Geoff had told me.

"You'd rather use the carrot than the stick?"

Unless they're hurting someone. That's different. I hate people hurting people. I will manhandle them if necessary, don't care about assault charges, I will not have people hurting people.

This attitude of Geoff's was to be seriously challenged over the course of my conversations with him. In an incident at school, he chose to act to stop one student from slapping at another, pulling the aggressor away by his jumper sleeve when a verbal request for the student to stop had failed to have that effect. The student had complained to his parent, who took the matter up with the Department of Education. After its investigation, the department had decided that the matter would not be taken further. However, Geoff had been cautioned, and this had obviously been a stressful time for him, causing him self doubt.

In a more recent and widely publicised incident in Tasmania, a person in a senior position in a school was suspended from work after restraining a violent student. Daily, teachers like Geoff are in the position of having to support aggressive and violent students, and yet receive little support from the department for which they work.



“For the kids who need a father figure, I’m it”

As a child, Geoff had attended a state-run kindergarten, and then the rest of his education had been conducted in Catholic schools. When Geoff was 11, his father had died, and his mother had relocated the rest of the family when Geoff was 14. For a couple of school terms he'd lived with cousins. By Year 10, in order to cope, his mother had sent him to St. Matthews, a Catholic boarding school. *Bastards, bastards! I HATED them, absolutely hated 'em, hated boardin' school.*

Despite his dislike of boarding, Geoff *did reasonably well at school. I always passed. I don't think I ever got a credit in m'life 'til I got to uni really, and that took about 5 years,* he laughs.



As I said, my father died when he was 41. When I got to 40, I literally went to pieces, thought I was going to die within the year, and then by the time I got to 42, well!

“Got through 41!” I laugh.

Yeab! Don't worry any more, chuckles Geoff, who turned 50 this year. *And, I would say it was my mid-life crisis and it was really just, you know, you've gotta have one! Might as well do it about this!*



Geoff believes he acts as a type of male role model, or touchstone, perhaps, to boys in school who don't have a father-figure. *Walking around primary schools, you get to know the children, or some of the children who either don't have a father, or a father who doesn't work or whatever, because they use YOU, as the person they come and talk to, and it's usually just that, they just want to see you, say "Hello," and that's all they need, and off they toddle. But the thing is, that's what I am at Devil's Ridge Primary School. I'm a strange attractor; for the kids who need a father figure, I'm it. I'm not the only male there, but the other one's a classroom teacher.*

"You take on that role?" I ask, thinking that the absence of Geoff's father in his own childhood may give him insights into the needs of children in similar situations.

Well, they GIVE it to me, yeah, the children do.

"So, it's not something that you really seek out?" I query.

No!

"Okay, so how does that fit with you not having had a Dad growing up past 11?"

Mmm. No, not relevant, I don't think.

"Don't you think?"

Nuh.

"No?"

No.

"You don't think you've put yourself in that role because you missed it yourself?"

No, I don't think I put myself in the role.

"You think they do?"

I think the children who NEED me put me in the role, and I'm happy to take it on, y'see, he reiterates his stance.

"So, it probably has to do with your happiness to take it on then?"

Geoff's answer to my question comes in the form of a story told in order to support his claim that it is the children (or teachers, perhaps) who cast him in the role of surrogate father.

The preps had a parent group yesterday, and that meant that for every child either a parent or a grandparent was coming in to work with them for the morning.

“Great!” I comment. I’d loved school open days when I had been invited to visit my children’s classrooms.

Yeah, well, there was a few, for one reason or another, the parent can’t turn up, so I was working with Dana. Dana lives with her Mum, not with her Dad. Dad’s got a new girlfriend. Dad said that he was coming in to work with Dana, and we got through probably 40 minutes and two activities and that was it. She almost growled, “My Dad’s not gonna come. I knew he wouldn’t.” Anyway, just as we were gettin’ to crisis point, in Dad walks, and I thought, “Ah, thank Christ!” Geoff slaps his knee and laughs. *’Cos if he hadn’t, I don’t know, you know. Yeah,* he laughs again.

“Mm, pretty hard for little ones,” I comment, having seen similar situations arise when working as an aide in kindergarten and prep classes.

But, that’s what I’m talkin’ about, that was a deliberate thing, that they put me with her, y’see.

“Mm,” I murmur.

But boy I was glad when Dad walked in, I tell you. He was high as a kite, I’m sure. And the teacher said so today. But it didn’t matter. He just had to be there, and he was there.

“Mm, so they select you as a father figure. You don’t actually do that.” I give ground after my earlier “interrogation” of Geoff.

Mm, mm. But see, strange attractors. Why does all the dust, when you do the vacuum cleaning, hide under the bed?

I let out a loud burst of laughter at this unexpected turn in our conversation.

It’s the same thing; it’s strange attractors.

“Is it?” I ask, somewhat confused by Geoff’s meaning.

But it works with people and relationships just as much as it does with particles of dust that blow in from outer space.

“Well, can you tell me how to get rid of the particles of dust from under and on everything, ’cos I have trouble with that?” I laugh, reminded of the dusting I rarely manage to get done at home.

Nuh, nuh, can’t do it.

“You can’t?”

No.

“Oh, so I can just say it’s to do with chaos theory, and it has to be there, otherwise the world will fall apart.”

Mmm! They’re strange attractors, yeah.



“Only good comes”

As the sun makes its arc across the afternoon sky during our second interview, Geoff and I sit at the barbecue table on the porch outside his back door. I recall the time during the second group session, when participants were asked to share their memories of a sad event from the past with a partner for 2 minutes without interruption.

Talking to his partner about the death of his father during this paired sharing had brought back strong feelings of sadness for Geoff, which had surprised him somewhat. In sharing this event, he was *reliving it, very vividly. I mean it’s a very sad thing, isn’t it? So as I said, actually remembering very clearly.* And here he pauses for a moment, then coughs before continuing. *I don’t know, but see, possibly, is it,* and he pauses again. As he struggles to continue, I allow him some time to put his thoughts and feelings into words. Then, over the bird calls drifting up from the trees below, he continues in a wavering voice, *having not had a father, which, I don’t know, but it could be that, I suspect, but if it is I haven’t thought of it much before.*

He relates another poignant moment, memories bringing with them a strong emotional response. His voice cracks and his sentence comes haltingly, as tears fill his eyes. *And I can also remember quite clearly, I reckon 12 months to the day. ... We were in the backyard of the house skateboarding. ... And a man walked down the driveway, ... and I remember thinking, “That’s Dad.”* He stops again for a moment to dab tears from under the rim of his glasses. *Wasn’t. No.* And after a long pause, he finishes, saying, *Which I think is when I was able to accept.*

I feel a range of emotions and thoughts flooding through me: sorrow for the young boy who lost his father too soon, and empathy for the man who hasn’t thought much of the event for a long time, now recalling it and sitting with his emotions.

And then, after a few more exchanges, and perhaps in order to regain his composure:

*Can you press pause? I'm just gonna nip in and get a glass, 'cos I've got big stubbies.*²⁰



When I ask Geoff what he believes is the best thing to come from his participation in the MESH program, he considers for a moment. Then answers that, for him, it has been *learning the rules of creating an environment, whereby, as in, it's very strict, isn't it, the framework for the group and what you can and can't do and WHO you talk to about what goes on in the sessions. So you have that feeling that this is sort of a closed circle, and that's why it's safe to talk because you know it's not going to go away, out of the room. No-one else is gonna know about it, and that's what I think allows people to open up and talk.*

“So that’s an issue of trust, then, really?”

Mmm. And feeling safe. If you provide that safe environment for people, they will talk about things that're causing them trouble, and from that, it seems, only good comes. It's almost like if you explore these things that are uncomfortable to you, in the right situation, it does good, or good results from it.

And, as I said, the bit I really liked was the group rules – reiterating the group purposes and guidelines before each group session – this is what we do and this is what [we] don't do.



At uni, Geoff *always got credits for philosophy. Yeah, 'cos I loved it.* Indeed, it is this love of philosophy that caused Geoff to phone me and opt into the study. *You're doing a Doctor of Philosophy*, he explains to me when I miss the connection to my study.

Representative of Geoff's reading list are library borrowings such as John Gribbin's *In Search of the Edge of Time: Black Holes, White Holes, Wormholes*, Ian Stewarts' *Does God Play Dice? The New Mathematics of Chaos* and *Big Questions in Science* edited by Harriet Swain. For me, these books serve to confirm his keen and long-held interest in musings both philosophical and scientific – *only the maths part doesn't interest me, I'm afraid*, he laughs. So, I'm not surprised to hear that, although Geoff hasn't run a MESH support group since completing the workshop, he has introduced the concept of confidentiality into class discussions with students in a Grade 6 unit on philosophy.

It's not the same. But we talked about the things like, you know, people might discuss things in this room that no-one else out of this room is gonna hear. I want everybody to feel safe to talk, ask

²⁰ A “stubby” is a small short-necked bottle of beer (375ml). By saying “big stubbies” Geoff refers to “long-necks,” which are a larger bottle of beer (1.25l).

questions and talk race issues, knowing that only the people who're in this room listening to it are ever gonna hear about it, before we get started. Saying to the children that we may be talking about things that are for US to talk about and no-one else, having been there and done it sort of thing, I think it helps a lot, yeah.

“You might not have done it that way before?” I check to see if Geoff’s change in practice is a result of his attendance at the workshop.

Oh, no, wouldn’t’ve. Wouldn’t’ve known what to do. Wouldn’t’ve had a clue. In that, with that big group sense, yes.

“So you’ve transferred that understanding to a different situation then?”

Yes, mm.

Geoff’s MESH experience has reaffirmed his way of working, and he also believes it has increased his level of confidence and given him some new skills. This has led to him becoming more positive in his dealings with students. *Well, I’m sure it’s the same old thing, you feel more certain about what you’re doing and you have more faith that you’re doing the right thing. Especially with the work at Devil’s Ridge where I do the same thing every week, with the relief teaching.*

The other thing that I think MESH has affected me is being pro-active in the sense of being nice to people and supporting them and getting them on the right track and doing the right thing, instead of waiting for them to muck up and then coming in and fixing the situation.

“So that’s sort of building relationships with them, or just being a little bit more...”

Yeah, well just being there and being available and talking to them and saying good morning and smiling at them, using their name, he laughs.

“When you can remember them,” I add, jokingly, knowing that Geoff’s laugh relates to his previous reference to his very poor memory for names.

Yeah, and I’m sure it helps.



Leaving the field

In normal relationships the people you tend to hang around with are the ones who you can sit down and chat to without feeling any stress. And this [interview] is, in a sense, an artificial version of that, isn’t it? It’s a deliberate situation.

After two previous in-depth interviews with him, and eight group sessions over 3 long days, I feel at ease in my conversations with Geoff. As we sit outside listening to the wind-chimes and the bird calls in the forest, him with his beer and me with my tea, I am able to confide in him the emotional tax I feel I am paying as I am negotiating my exit from the field: “I find it difficult in a way, because I’m interested in my participants beyond the research. I think the connections I’ve made are really important ones; personally important.”

Yes!

“As well as ...”

Professionally important.

“Professionally important, yes. And, because I’ve made connections with all of you – in the groups, in the interviews, and afterwards – it’s quite a difficult thing to walk away. I start writing about each of you, and the stories come back and I live them over again. It’s quite an emotional toll really,” I admit.

This mirrors conversations I’d had with my supervisor during a period when I was feeling very emotionally drained. At the time, my father had been very ill, it was approaching Christmas and, I feared, the possibility of his impending death. As well, I’d had a hard time admitting that my emotional involvement with my research topic – the intensely personal nature of the group sessions, the affective nature of many of the interviews, and my relationships with my participants – was creating added stress, beyond the normal pressures associated with researching and writing a doctoral dissertation.

Geoff appears to understand at least some of my dilemma, and I ask him if he has thought about the people he “grouped” with, or their stories, since the group.

I think about the people, yes. And some of them are fuzzy and some of them are as clear as a bell, as in the faces of the people who were there, which makes me think that I obviously related better to the ones that were as clear as a bell.

My experience is the same. I relate more closely to some people and their stories than I do with others. As he’s mentioned the “fuzziness” of some faces, I check to see whether Geoff has received Nairn’s e-mailed photographs of our group.

It was sent to me. It’s with m’ MESH certificate. It’d be up on the filing cabinet.

Reminded about the certificate, I ask if Geoff can recall the comments the other group members made about him that Nairn has recorded on its reverse. At this, he stands up, tells me he'll be back in a minute, and goes inside to locate the document. Returning to the table, he hands his certificate to me, face down. In Nairn's calligraphic hand, it reads:

*Honest and true to yourself
Independent and giving
Able!!
In the here and now
Self-certain
Self-assured
Available and ready
Brave
Gentle strength.*

Chapter 7

Naomi Cameron

“I guess I sort of feel like I’m judged”

Naomi Cameron had a little more “warning” about the personal and emotional nature of MESH than did many of the other participants in my study. Naomi’s husband, Peter, had been a participant in a whole-staff PD at Happy Valley Primary School in early February, 2004. Naomi had *heard bits and pieces each night, although limited because it was all confidential. The main things I remember [Peter telling me] about it is that it’s very confronting; it brings up issues – personal issues for teachers – which are quite confronting for them and difficult at times. But then again it was good, because it was almost like a 3-day therapy session. And at the time I thought, “What a waste of time, getting teachers to do that when they should be learning about teaching.”*

I actually felt a bit cross about it all on a personal level, because I’m his wife, and I was thinking, “Well, he’s supposed to be talking to me about all this, not all these people he works with.” I actually felt quite annoyed about it all. And I thought, “What a stupid thing to have the whole school [staff do].” I felt like saying, “Well, why don’t you come and BOND with me, instead of BONDing with them.” He said, “I can’t tell you what I talked about,” and I thought, “Oh, right!”



“At the moment I’m doing 80% social work”

Given what she had heard from Peter and the view she had originally held about the PD, I am curious to find out why Naomi has now enrolled in the PD herself. She gives an ironic laugh before explaining to me the reasons behind her 180-degree turn in thinking. *Since then, I’ve been at Firestone Primary School which has been a huge learning curve, and my role as support has been that I deal with kids that have horrendous backgrounds and HUGE emotional problems – social problems – and we expect them to come and behave like*

middle class citizens that've always had a middle class upbringing, and they haven't! So you have to wade through all that before you can actually get any teaching or learning done. And it manifests itself in behaviour, that's what I've found. And I've found [that I have] this HUGE sympathy and HUGE realisation that this is just awful, and I just think, "Oh, no! What can I do?"

Naomi explains the difficulties she and other teachers at the school face in trying to teach kids what they need to know to be[come] adults and survive in a middle class society, but you've also got to understand that they've never had that background, so they're not going to know things instinctively that we, as middle class people, think they should know. I think a lot of them have this big conflict between what's being taught to them [at school] and what is being told at home. At our school we actually talk to the kids about school rules and home rules and street rules, because they're all different for them. I mean someone down the street [probably] thinks they speak terribly, but that's just the way they speak. [The people down the street,] they don't know that that's their language.

The suburb of Firestone is located on the outskirts of the capital, and is an area of low socio-economic status, where the residents are predominantly recipients of welfare, and live in government-owned housing. Generational poverty in this suburb is the norm. There is *a lot of unemployment. A lot of single parents. A lot of the kids' parents have [had] exactly the same school experience [as their kids are now having]. They don't like school, so why should their kids? They don't blame their kids for mucking around; they did that too. There's a few abused kids, incest, but there's lots of stuff going on that we don't know as well, that's the thing.*

Despite the obvious welfare needs of the students at Firestone Primary, the school only receives the services of a qualified social worker for *half a day a week, and a guidance officer one day a fortnight*. This low level of support from welfare professionals for students with high emotional needs means that teachers are often placed in a difficult situation, professionally. Naomi finds that it's not easy to engage her students in learning without first attending to their individual emotional needs.

I saw the MESH flyer and I thought "Well, maybe I should do that," because at the moment I'm doing 80% social work, which I'm not qualified to do. It's just common sense – often just giving kids a bit of space to be on their own, just giving them someone to talk to who's just going to listen and not jump down their throat and yell at them, someone who's going to understand but maybe offer a couple of suggestions, point them in the right direction to get professional help if they need it. I thought, "I really should be trying to do something to make myself a bit more well-equipped to

handle all this."

So, I saw the MESH flyer and I thought, "Well, that's a good start!" I've heard it's great, and it's probably good for teachers, but I think in my role it might be particularly good, because I can become a facilitator of groups for the kids and I could have specialist sessions and pass on what I've learnt, go a bit more into that field – that's if I get a job there next year. Naomi is a recent teaching graduate and her position at Firestone is temporary. She works for 3 days a week as a support teacher and 2 days a week teaching a Grade 4/5 class.

Additionally, it has occurred to Naomi, as it had to Geoff Murray,¹ that by completing the PD she may make herself more valuable to her school and so be considered to have *a bit of an edge* when she is seeking re-employment next year. *So that's probably a selfish way [to think], but it's not really. I thought, "Well, even if I don't [find that this assists me with securing work next year], it's probably a good thing to do because there are so many crises these days, no matter what school you're at you've got kids that have problems."*



"I'll just put my shutters down and listen"

Peter's forewarnings about the emotional nature of the MESH workshop, coupled with some stressful events in her personal life over the past few years, caused Naomi to plan her own strategy for "surviving" what she expects to be an intense 3 days.

*I'd heard that there were tears and stuff, not from who, or about what, but there were very big issues that came up, so, yeah, I feel a bit, not apprehensive, but I'm sort of thinking, "Well, I'll just put my shutters down and listen." I've had a lot of issues in the last few years; my parents have died, and I've been divorced, and I've had two children when I'm over 40 and that was difficult, and all these things have happened to me, and I'm thinking, "I don't really want to bring up all these personal issues in front of all these strangers." Despite having attended a couple of counselling sessions in the past when she felt that she *just wasn't coping* after the death of her parents, *studying and having little kids*, Naomi tells me that she is not someone who finds it easy to openly discuss issues of a personal nature. *I prefer to listen, rather than talk. Yeah. I'm more comfortable being a listener.**

For the most part, however, during the first 2 days of the MESH workshop, Naomi was able to manage her emotional state. She was able to process the lecture information and stories told during group sessions at a professional level, and her

¹ See Geoff Murray's narrative account (p. 155).

strategy of “putting the shutters down” appeared to be working well for her.

However, as it tends to do, the intensity of the sharing changed over the course of the 3 days, and for Naomi the sharing on the last day reached a much deeper, and more personal, level. It was then that Naomi’s strategy slowly came unstuck. *Day 3, it wasn’t just me, I think it hit a lot of people, but I was annoyed with myself ’cos I hadn’t managed to keep the lid on!* Naomi laughs as she reflects upon how her well-planned strategy eventually failed her. *The third day wore me down! I was surprised. On that last day I just thought I was going to be fine and I wouldn’t be affected by anything and I just, oh, a couple of things that were said, and I just thought, “Oh! God!” Things just dawn on you. I think the last day was a lot more personal. The other 2 days I kept thinking, “You’re relating it to school.”*

On that third day, I observed that Naomi was very quiet and introverted in the group setting. I remember distinctly the concern I felt for her at the time, and my memory is supported by the notes I wrote while in the field. In talking about what I’d witnessed, I describe to Naomi how she appeared to be “shell-shocked.” *I was! I really think I gave myself a really hard time on that day. Things were said and I just thought, “That’s me, that’s what I’ve done, and I’ve brought all this on myself.”*

“What sort of things?” I ask, seeking to understand the cause of Naomi’s withdrawal into herself on that day.

Oh, I don’t know. [Nairn had talked about how] you have to be able to say, “No,”² and to put the responsibility onto somebody else, which is a big issue in this household. Because I sort of do everything, and I have to push to keep things done, get responsibility taken. And because I don’t like confrontation, in the end it’s just easier to do it myself, and that’s exactly what my mother used to say. I remember my mother saying it. We were nine kids and she did everything pretty much, and I remember saying to her as an adult, “Why didn’t you get us to do something?” She said, “Oh, it was just quicker and easier to do it myself.” And I just thought, “Oh! You’re just such a product of your family.”

The realisation of things suddenly dawned on me and I thought, “Oh!” And it would just hit me like a slap in the face about these things that seem so obvious. She laughs at how she had, until Day 3 of the workshop, been so unaware of the things happening in her life. *Things that I think would be so obvious just, I hadn’t thought of. When Nairn was talking about saying*

² It has been suggested that in order to limit others’ expectations and lessen the likelihood of being (or feeling) “abused” by superiors or colleagues, teachers need to learn to say “No” when asked to do even more than they already do (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991; Skovholt & Yoo, 1999; Woods & Carlyle, 2002; see also Satir, 1978).

“No” to things, and I said [to her], “But sometimes you don’t say ‘No’ because it means that there’s going to be a confrontation, or you’re going to make the other person unhappy by saying No,” and she said, “But then you make yourself unhappy.” “Oh!” I just thought, “Oh! Wow! That’s what I do!”

“So you’re willing to sacrifice your own happiness each time instead of putting a relationship on the line, or trying to work something out?” I reiterate the gist of Nairn’s comments to Naomi.

Yes, yes. Yeah, and I do that a lot. And I do that at work. I do that all the time. I’d just rather do it and keep things calm and get eaten up inside but it doesn’t matter. Naomi laughs at the incongruity of her statement.

“Your feelings aren’t important?”

No! I don’t know why I do that. But I just thought, “Oh, wow!” because sometimes when I say, “No,” it ends up being a big drama, and then there’s conflict and I think, “Oh! That just wasn’t worth it!” It causes me more pain to do that than it would’ve if I’d just said, “Oh, okay. I’ll do it,” so it’s a bit of a balancing thing, I suppose. But it’s actually interesting how much that affected me, just that one sentence that Nairn said, and I felt like someone had hit me. I just thought, “Oh, wow! That’s just ...” Yeah.

Just things like that struck me and a couple of things I thought I’d got over, brought back up, and I just felt like I had an overflowing pot.³ And I thought, “I’m about to overflow here!” Naomi laughs, and then confirms a thought I’d had on the third day; that she’d had to fight down a flight response to the stress she was feeling. *I was almost out the door, ‘cos I thought, “I don’t want to do this. I just don’t want to do that with all those people watching. I just didn’t feel comfortable.*

“Didn’t feel comfortable talking or crying?” I ask, trying to clarify her meaning.

Crying.

“I remember looking at you and you looked so withdrawn.”

I was keeping a lid on it, Naomi laughs, returning to the pot metaphor.

“Yeah, I could see you kept looking down; you were looking down for most of the

³ During the workshop, Nairn talks about people having “sad pots” and “angry pots” and how if the sadness or anger isn’t let out eventually a pot fills up until it starts to overflow, expressed as tears or angry outbursts, often over a seemingly minor incident. This may be based on the work of Virginia Satir (1988).

day. You looked really upset.”

Yep, yep. I mean, I think it was a good thing, makes you think about lots of things. And then when you think about it in a school context, “Whoa!” How many kids are out there and keeping a lid on things? That’s why they boil over and they get SO angry, so quickly, over NOTHING, and they’ve got all these other issues, and that’s what happens; it overflows every now and then.

From the personal understanding Naomi has gained from her group experience she has been able to develop a professional insight; one which helps to explain the behaviour she all-too-frequently witnesses in her work with students at school.



After that very difficult third day, Naomi went home and reflected on her patterns of behaviour; patterns she is only now beginning to recognise. *When I got home, I thought, “How do I feel?” and I thought, “I feel confused, that’s what I feel.” It just brought up all these issues and new feelings that I didn’t realise that I had.*

I actually felt a bit down, because I thought, “Oh, God! I’ve got all these things I haven’t really dealt with in my life. What will I do? And now I have to start again.” But not really, ’cos you get things in perspective. It’s a full-on 3 days, and at the end of the third day, your head’s full, your brain’s on overdrive. I mean, dealing with those emotions as well, and listening to other people.

And then the other thing that struck me was that all these other people have lots of things that they’re dealing with as well. And that’s the other thing; it really makes you feel like you’re just one of the crowd. And I think that’d be good for [kids at] school, ’cos lots of kids with problems do tend to be self-centred, and I guess they do feel like they’re the only ones that’ve got issues.

“Yes,” I agree. I’ve heard participants talk of the normalising function of the group process on many occasions, and have experienced that same feeling myself.

I hear the television in the room next door being switched off, and Naomi’s 2½ year-old daughter, Petalyn, comes and climbs onto her mother’s lap, wanting a cuddle. Naomi offers her a biscuit from the biscuit tin, and we laugh together as the little girl’s hand hovers over the tin during a lengthy decision-making process; to our adult eyes the biscuits appear to be almost identical.

After the obviously difficult time that Naomi experienced on the third day, I’m a little surprised at her response when I ask her what it was like to share her story with the group. Her child still snuggled on her lap, she responds, *I thought it was actually easier than I thought it would be. I didn’t think I’d say anything. I thought, “I won’t.”*

You can think of examples that are okay to say; not your deepest, darkest secrets, but I was surprised at how deep people went and how brave people felt, and I guess I felt like that too. And how comfortable and safe you feel, that was a big thing, saying [things about my life] to these people I'd known for [only] 3 days. I just thought "Wow!" It's a very empowering format, to be able to feel like that; that you can say things and not be judged by what you say. I was surprised by how open people were and how brave and comfortable you feel in telling your stories. You think, "Oh yeah, that's right, I've got a story" and you almost could go on for ages.



I am interested to find out how Naomi is progressing with saying "No" a year after the workshop. *I think I've actually, yeah, I'm better at that now. And I find, 'cos these kids that I teach and work with, they want something, and you think, "Oh, the poor little darlings," but then sometimes you have to say, "No, that's not ..." and I do that a bit better now than I used to. I used to feel sorry for them all the time, and say, "Yes," to everything, but you can't because that's not treating them the same as treating other kids. So, you've gotta be fair. So I do say "No" a bit more easily now.*

I wonder whether she has been able to begin to say "No" within her personal life. "Personally, too?" I ask.

Personally, yes. Yes, I do.



"My father was a bit of an inspiration"

Naomi and Peter live in a home on a hill overlooking the capital's northern suburbs. As Naomi and I sit and chat together over a cup of tea and my favourite biscuits in the light-filled, open-plan living area of their home, we discover that we share a few biographical similarities and milestones. We are the same age, both attended Catholic schools, married at 19, worked as teachers' aides, and then began an education degree at uni at age 39, but at opposite ends of the state.

Unlike me, however, Naomi first wanted to become a teacher when she left high school. Instead, though, she *ended up getting married, and just doing a boring job. You know, it's funny, those Catholic schools, they had no career advice. Nothing. And my parents – I'm one of nine, so they didn't really have time to sit down and say, "Well, what would you like to do with your life?"* Naomi was eventually offered a job working 30 hours a week in the library at Happy Valley Primary. *I did that for 5 years. I was a teacher assistant, but I actually had library classes.*

Classes would come in and the teachers would go, so I was basically doing a librarian sort of job, but as a library aide. That was half the time. The other half the time I was special aide and general aide through the whole school from prep to [Grade] 6.

Working in the school library at Happy Valley, Naomi regretted not having become a teacher, and this regret was compounded when other people, seeing her so engaged in her work, would say to her, “You should’ve been a teacher.” “Yes, I *know*,” she’d say.

Then, a tragic and unexpected set of family circumstances brought about a change in Naomi’s thinking about her abilities, and caused her to reconsider the options for her future.

The thing that actually made me really decide to [enrol to study so that I could become a teacher] was that my father was sick. I took some time off from my position as a teacher assistant to go and look after him, because he had cancer and was dying, and I nursed him.

We were quite close, and I remember thinking years ago, you sort of think as you’re growing up, I had this terrible fear about my parents dying, and I thought I could never BEAR to do anything like [nurse them], but because my mother was also sick, had motor neurone disease, she couldn’t [nurse him], because she was incapacitated as well. My children were older, and my sisters had little children. It was just natural that I’d do it, and I just loved doing it and it was great, and I think I was quite good at it. But the fact that I actually did it and that I had all these horrible things to do, like I had to tell Mum what the doctors had said, and the final verdict – horrible things like that to do. But I did it, you know, quite calmly, and in control. And then, after it was all over, I just thought, “Oh wow! I did that!” and I never thought I could’ve done that, so I thought, “Oh, well, maybe the teaching thing’s a bit the same.” So I thought, “Oh, well, I’ll go for that and try and do that,” so that’s why I did. So my father was a bit of an inspiration in that way. It was just after he died that I made the decision.

Mum was still around, and I think she thought I was a bit silly doing it, because I had all the children. She was a much harder woman. We were brought up Catholic, and ’cos I left my husband I was really not a very good person. I remember her saying to me, “You stupid girl!” I think she thought my judgement was completely wrong. ’Cos at that time Peter and I were together, but not married, which was another big thing, and then I got pregnant after I’d enrolled to do uni. We were both approaching our late 30s, [I already had four children] and Peter didn’t want any children. Great! And then he changed his mind, Naomi laughs at this quirk of human nature. So I think when I got pregnant and told Mum, “Well, I’m pregnant now, and I’m at uni, and I’m living with this man!” it was just all too much.

I mean guilt is just what the Catholic faith thrives on.⁴ And I was brought up feeling guilty if I did ANYTHING. I NEVER got into trouble at school or did anything [wrong], so when I did this – left my husband [after 16 years of marriage] – EVERYBODY was absolutely, they couldn't believe it. But I'd been unhappy for YEARS, but you don't say anything. I didn't say anything, 'cos what's the point? I had four children. I thought, "Well, I'm never going to do anything about it," but when I did, whoa! it hit the fan then. And my parents didn't speak to me for months. So it was horrible. But then they got sick.



A year after telling a story of nursing her dying father to the group, Naomi reflects on how vocalising her story has enabled her to recognise the significance of that event in her life. Her understanding was made more apparent to her, too, after she witnessed the reactions of the others in the group to her emotional retelling.

I suppose you get another perspective on your stories. You get the reaction of other people and you think, "Oh, that's not a very good story, that's just something that happened to me," but they go, "Oh! Wow! That's amazing," and you think, "Oh, maybe it is," so it's a different perspective. When it happens to you, you tend to downplay it a little bit, then you think [after hearing other people's reactions], "Oh, yeah, well, that was pretty amazing," whatever it might be. Yeah. I suppose you get a different perspective on it.

To vocalise some of those things was, you might actually think them in your head and be fine. You actually vocalise them, and hear yourself saying [them] and your reaction is quite different, isn't it? I remember telling the story about when Dad had died and I was with him and stuff, and I mean that's 5 or 6 years ago now, and I just felt really shaky, and so I thought, "Oh, God!" And I'd spoken to lots of people about it lots of times, but, I hadn't talked about it or thought about it for quite a while, and vocalising it actually changes it. It becomes real again. It's almost like it takes it back [to that time] and it happens again.

Naomi believes that others hearing her story might have been able to better appreciate that *everybody has stories and everybody has some down times and things that happen to them and they get over it, and by you contributing and saying to them, "Well, I'm one of them too. I've done all this," and some people have AWFUL things that've happened to them, and I suppose I would never have thought about being able to cope when I lost my parents. I thought that would've*

⁴ "‘Catholic guilt,’ [is] the sense of being driven by some automatic, prereflective, masochistic, or otherwise pathological residue of childhood conditioning. ... such powerful ideas might instill in someone raised a Catholic the need to suffer a tangible penance before that individual can feel forgiven." (Landman, 2001, p. 53)

been just the worst thing. Before you lose them, you think, "I could never cope with that." Yeah, and if someone had said to me, "You're gonna be with your father, and he's gonna die with you [present], and you're gonna look after him," I'd [have] thought, "I could NEVER do that." And I suppose by expressing that that's what has happened and you have done that, you give other people a bit of confidence that things that you just never thought you could do, or we can do, we can all do.



"I do think I give myself too hard a time"

As Petalyn drops crumbs on the carpet that the cleaning lady has vacuumed earlier in the day, I query Naomi about whether she's learned anything about herself during the 3-day workshop.

Oh, heaps! Heaps. I learned that I do give myself too hard a time. I learned that I take on too much responsibility because I think I must be the only one who'd be able to do things properly. And I thought, "It doesn't really matter." If the kids wear odd pyjamas to bed does it really matter? All these little silly things that you get into a habit with. I mean I'm not particular about what they wear in that regard, but I need them to be dressed fairly nicely and I need them to have a clean face. I can't help but laugh at Naomi's comment, because, when she arrived home with her children, the face of one child had obviously been used as a canvas for a face-painter at crèche. But Naomi continues. Have a bath every night, and yeah, look at that! My glance follows Naomi's and I laugh again at sight of the cherubic face covered in all the colours of the rainbow. That's what I took out! Oh, my God!

"It's gorgeous!" I chuckle.

I know, it's just, yeah, and so I think, "Well, those little things don't really matter." Things maybe got in perspective a bit more. And the things that are important. I don't go to the extent of my sister, who's madly house-proud. She dusts the skirting boards every day and I think she's covering up for something that's lacking in her life, and I'm not like that, but I guess I sort of feel like I'm judged. Oh, it's a bit silly, I suppose it's just a bit of confidence [I lack] or something. Yeah, I did learn a lot about myself, and I do think I give myself too hard a time.



And the forgiveness thing.⁵ It was really like hitting a brick wall when we did that forgiveness thing. I couldn't do it. The first one when we had to write a letter to someone to forgive them, I didn't do that. I just thought, "Oh, who am I going to forgive? I don't know." I just couldn't do that. And

then the letter to myself. Oh! I just thought, "Oh! I've just done ALL these things wrong. How am I going to forgive myself for all that?" Putting my kids through divorce when maybe I should've stayed in that marriage and just "grin and bear it" for the sake of the children, 'cos that was a big issue. When I left I thought, "I'm gonna just ruin these poor kids' lives," but I haven't! You know, they're fine. Naomi explains the internal battle that has raged within her – I do give myself a hard time, but then I just thought, "Well, you deserve it. Look at what you've done!"



Naomi has attended counselling in the past to try to help her to cope with issues in her life. I have heard past group members favourably compare the influence of the MESH workshop with their experiences of attending therapy and counselling sessions, so I am interested to hear Naomi's thoughts on this.

It was different. Counselling they just sort of listen and talk to you about things and give you suggestions but this was quite, I don't know what it was about it but it was different. It was more intense, more upsetting, I think. Not upsetting, but revealing.

"About yourself?"

Yes. More of yourself comes out than in counselling, perhaps, 'cos with counselling you talk about THE problem, rather than "I." You might say [to a counsellor], "What can I do? This is the situation. What can I do?" or "What should I do? This is how I feel." But, this just sort of went that next level down.

"So, how did you feel about that?"

Oh, no, it was good, I think. Yeah, I think it's a good thing to do. I'd been to counselling before MESH, and I've been to counselling since then, and it hasn't had the same impact [as MESH did].



According to Naomi, Peter's experience of MESH had caused him to believe that she'd have trouble coping with the group process, as he believes her to be quite an emotional person. Apparently he had thought that she'd "go to pieces" in the group sessions. After the PD, he'd asked her, "*Did you [go to pieces]?*" and when she'd hesitated to respond, he'd exclaimed, "*Oh, you did!*" But I don't think he realised the extent. *We didn't really talk about it*, she finishes, looking at me a little sheepishly.

⁵ The same process described in Kym Oliver's narrative account (see p. 132).

I can't help but give a small laugh at what we both understand to be the irony of her comment. Naomi has already discussed how she had been unhappy in her first marriage and hadn't talked with her ex-husband about how she'd felt. It is her belief that this lack of communication was at least partially responsible for the breakdown of that marriage. By Day 3 of the workshop, she had begun to realise that communication has deteriorated to a similar extent in her marriage to Peter.

She exhales and shakes her head. *Yes, yes*, she acknowledges before continuing. *Sunday we didn't have a terribly good day. We didn't argue, but he actually said, "This is just not sustainable," and I said, "Yes, I realise that." And I said, "Well, you know what we've gotta do, don't you?" 'cos he's always refused counselling [in the past]. I've been trying to [get him to attend counselling with me], but I think he pushes things down more than I do, and I actually said, "I think we're too much the same [in that we don't communicate well about how we're feeling]. I think that's what one of our big problems is."*

"It's really hard to break out of those patterns of behaviour."

Yeah. Yes. YES! And that's what I thought too, on that third day, I thought, "Oh, here we go again. I'm just gonna put myself all through this again," and I don't want to do that. And I've got children, and I thought, "Oh! I can't [put us all through another separation/divorce]!" It's destroying. It's indescribable what it does to you, and ours was actually an amicable [separation and divorce], in the end, fairly amicable, and we're talking, we're fine now and everything, but I still put my kids through all that. Oh! It makes me shudder just to think about it, and I thought, "Oh! I can't do this again!" I'm just not gonna do this again. So yeah.

"So, you're going to try and get some counselling?" I query.

Well, I think so. Haven't got any further really, but, Naomi falters, and again sighs.

"Haven't talked about that yet?"

No, she admits. *We haven't talked about it*, she laughs, before giving another audible sigh.



In the year since I last spoke with her, Naomi tells me that she and Peter *have come a long way, I suppose, personally*.

"Have you?"

Yeah, I think so. I think I feel quite independent now, and I thought, "If I was on my own," which

I very nearly am, 'I'd be fine."

"What do you mean by saying that you very nearly are?"

Oh, well, we're basically apart, but we still have the same house.

"Are you? How do you feel about that?"

I don't know. I don't want to move. I don't want to change. I'm happy. And, 'cos I've got these two [pre-school age] children, and I just don't want to do all that [separation and divorce] again. It's HORRIBLE. I just think now, 'There's no way I'm gonna do that again.' If he wants to leave, then it's okay. I'll be fine. But I'm not leaving.

He's moved into the other room and we both have our jobs and we share, sort of share the ch-. It's BIZARRE, I know. I'm not quite sure how it will go. But it's been a bit tense. This has just sort of evolved for now. We've discussed it and said, 'Well, this is what's happening. Do you really wanna, you know?' 'No, I don't want.' 'No, I don't want to either.' 'Okay.' So, we're sort of leading separate lives almost, but we have this common, we're sort of friends at the moment, which is good. And I'm not quite sure how it will work out, whether it'll get too difficult.

"Last time you talked about maybe trying counselling. Did you do that?"

I went. Yeah. I've been wanting to go for a long time. I went and he went once with me. And that didn't work, so that's it, she laughs. And then I did go back again, to the same lady and said, 'Well, see!' she laughs again. So she told me what I had to do, and I tried to do it, but, you know.

"It didn't work?"

Yeah, so I just think, 'Oh, well, I've done the best that I possibly can, and I can't do any more.' And I'm quite happy. I've got my kids. They're all gorgeous and I love 'em to bits. I don't really need anything else. I've got my job that I really like. I'm fine.

Naomi seems to be much more accepting of her situation and much less inclined to blame herself. "You said last time that you believed that you tend to give yourself a hard time. You don't sound as though you're doing that quite so much now."

No, I don't think so. Because that third day was a big shock for me. That third day was horrible, but I just thought, 'You blame yourself for so many things,' and I know that I did, you sort of have all these psychological things going on in your mind. Like, I've often thought of my mother and I think, 'I should do this. I should be like my mother.' But I think, 'Oh, I shouldn't be like my mother. I shouldn't be like that.' And wanting to do things for other people, I'm that sort of person,

and what I've found is that if you do that too much to some people you get taken for granted, and you're the giver and they're the taker and that's where it ends.

"It's not an equal relationship," I try to summarise what Naomi is telling me.

No! So, I've thought, "Well, I'm not doing that any more." And then you think, "Oh, that's a bit mean," but then I think, "No! That's fair."

"And so you've found that that's changed a bit?"

Yeah, yeah.

"Is that part of what you learnt at MESH or is that something else?"

Oh, I think it's part of MESH, because that third day was a bit of a corner-turning event, I think. I just thought, "This is so stupid." And we talked about how you have all these things and they build but you just have a lid on them. Well!

"The lid came off that day? The first 2 days you seemed to maintain the professional view, 'This is all for the students' and then the third day you were suddenly hit with, 'It's about me!'" I recall our earlier discussions on this point.

Yeah. It did that day. That's right. I couldn't do it any more. But I mean that was a good thing to do, I think.



Naomi originally wondered how participating in the MESH PD could help her relate to students with backgrounds that were very different to her own. Since experiencing the PD she thinks that *there are threads that happen in everybody's life, like how affected you are by your family, general things like that. There are aspects of my upbringing that would be the same as anywhere, same as kids out there, like the privacy thing – we were never really allowed to talk much about our family outside the house and for lots of those kids it's the same. There might be different things happening within the family but they're not allowed to talk much about it.*

I thought it [the MESH PD] was good. I think it's a good starting point; personally and professionally. I think you can do things and then relate back to it. You almost use it as a reference point for both your personal and professional life.

"Cos they tend to cross over?" I query, leading the conversation more than I like, upon reflection.

Oh, they do cross over a lot, don't they, yeah? And you're affected so much, especially in a job like this and both working in schools as we [Peter and I] do.

“And difficult schools.”

Yeah, with difficult kids and sad situations. You're torn between the discipline thing and the, you don't know whether to punish them or bug them. And then society and all the things that you need to conform to come into it, where you have to punish them, because there has to be a consequence and all that stuff. But, yeah, I think it's probably a good reference point to come back to and think about things. You think “Oh, yes, well in MESH they talked about this and this,” and almost use your [MESH] manual. Flip through that and find something relevant to what you're thinking about at the time. And become more aware of yourself and your defences. It does make you very self-aware, I think. Self-aware of the way your mind works and your psyche.



“Everyone’s not as they appear on the surface”

As a result of listening to other people’s stories, Naomi was able to learn from their way of dealing with whatever had happened in their life, and how they survived. That’s pretty powerful when you compare; you compare to your own life.

I think that everybody has their cross to bear. That all these people had other things that were happening in their lives, and I suppose that we’re all united in that way. That we all were teaching, and we’re all doing other things, and then we go home and have to deal with these other issues. And lots of people had stuff from their past which they’re dealing with, and I suppose it makes you think about why people are the way they are. [For example, you could think] that [a] person’s really crabby. Well, maybe there’s something that’s happened to them that’s made them that way.

I could see people learning a lot about themselves. That was really interesting. People like Patrick.⁶ I thought, “He’s learning a lot about himself.” It was interesting to see the reaction of other people, how they dealt with things, especially being so many men there.

“Yes,” I agree, “I thought it was really different having a group with so many men.” I am aware from my past experience that it is more usual for groups to include only one or two men. I’m unsure as to whether this reflects the higher proportion of women in the teaching profession, or whether more women choose to come to this type of PD. In contrast, however, approximately half the members of this particular group were men, creating what Nairn and I had both felt was a noticeably different group dynamic.

⁶ See Patrick Jamieson’s narrative account (p. 208).

During our first interview, when Naomi had asked who else would be attending the training, she had been a little anxious when I had listed the names and schools of those I knew were attending. She was concerned about the number of men who would be there, as well as by the impending presence of a group of teachers from an independent school – a school with a very different client base to that to which she was accustomed at Firestone.

I was wondering what it would be like. And I actually felt slightly uncomfortable at the start because there were so many men. I don't really relate that well to men, I don't think. I feel self-conscious and not so comfortable as with women. I didn't after a while, by the third day it was fine and that didn't worry me, so probably that's something else I learnt about myself. I just always feel worried about what they're gonna think about me.

“So, in the end you felt quite safe with the people who were there?” I check, aware that since a sexual assault in her teens Naomi finds trusting men to be difficult.

Yeah, yeah, I did in the end. I mean if you'd said to me on the first day this is what's gonna happen, I would've said, “Oh, no way! I'm not gonna! I won't reveal myself like that.” But I suppose I learnt that everybody has things they have to deal with and issues that they have to confront, and other things in their lives apart from their job. And that everyone's not as they appear on the surface.

That's the other thing; how judgmental we tend to be. I thought, “[Another group member,] Graeme's just a classic guy who doesn't have feelings.” But he does, you know. And you just think, “Oh, he's not at all like I thought he'd be!”

“It's sad that there are feelings that many men believe they're not allowed to show.”

Yeah, I agree. Yeah, it's alright if women cry.

“Is it?” I quip, thinking of Naomi's earlier comment about not feeling comfortable to cry in front of the group.

Apparently! she laughs. Oh yes, they just get labelled as “dizzy” and “scatty.”

“Maybe they're normal.”

They probably are.



“I was REALLY interested to see what people thought of me”

The final group session, during which each participant receives feedback from the other members of the group, really impressed Naomi. *When we did that thing at the end where Nairn wrote on the back of the certificate the qualities that everyone said [about each of the other participants in the group], I thought that was really interesting. 'Cos I thought, “Wow! It's 3 days and we've – I mean a lot of them knew each other; the Clovelly people – but I thought, “I hardly know these people,” and yet I could think of things, different words or phrases, that fitted them really well, and I thought it's quite amazing how your personality comes out.*

“And what amazes me is the number of times that people gazump each other, coming up with the same words to describe someone. They always say, ‘Oh! I was gonna say that!’ and that makes me feel that there's often quite a similarity between the qualities that people see.”

Yeah, that's right. And I was REALLY interested to see what people thought of me. I thought, “Oh, what're they gonna say? How do I come across?” I just thought, “I wonder what people see?” 'Cos I think I come across as being a bit stand-offish sometimes. I think it's probably 'cos I'm a bit shy. My mother was chronically shy, and I think I have that in a personal context, but at work I don't tend to have that. You almost put on a mask when you're at work, and you're in a position, and you are a teacher, and so this is the way you are. But when that's stripped off, you're a bit...

“When it's just you, you're a bit naked?” I prompt when Naomi doesn't continue after a pause.

Yeah, that's right. So, yeah, it was interesting, and some of those comments, I just thought, “Oh, wow! It's really nice that someone thought that about me.” Yeah.



As she has done so often during our interviews, Naomi takes what is personal to her and puts it in the context of the children she teaches at school. *We give criticism all the time. Not very often do we give [positive feedback]. Look what we do to school kids. I mean some of those kids out there just blossom when you say something nice to them, so you do try to do that all the time. Even when they're in a negative frame of mind you try to pick up on something that's positive, and that's so important. It's easy to say, “Oh! You're being really badly behaved today, and I'm REALLY disappointed with the way you've acted” and blab-blab-blab-blab. You could go on-and-on-and-on and I think they just switch off after the first sentence. But if you say, “Look, I'm really pleased with the way you did this. Maybe you could've done this a little bit better, but...” It's*

what you say and the way you say it, that has a big impact, I think.



A year after the workshop, the positive and reaffirming nature of the comments that the other group members made about her during the closing session is still impressing Naomi. *One of the most valuable things I found was the certificate we got at the end, with the things on the back about what people thought about you, and I thought that was fascinating.*

“Did you agree with what they said, or was it a real shock to you? How did you feel about what they’d said about you?” I ask, too many questions coming all at once.

No, I think I agreed, but, so some of it was a shock, and I was really interested to see how I came across to people, you know, how I just thought, “Oh, what’re they gonna think of me?” So, I thought that was VERY interesting. And I’ve got that up there on my noticeboard, stuck up on there, and I often sort of look at that and think, “Mm.”

Naomi had the front of the certificate on view to anyone perusing her noticeboard. *I don’t want anyone [else] to see the back! [If I want to read what they said about me] I can take it off and look, “That’s right. They said I was this or that or...”*

Graceful
Tender-hearted
Reflective
Many-layered
Thoughtful and caring
Interesting
Sensitive
Awesome
Maternal
Enigmatic
Elfin
Grounded
Family first

Some of it’s obvious, like “maternal.” Well, anyone with six children, you know, you’d pretty well have to be.

“Yes,” I laugh with Naomi at the seemingly obvious statement made by one member of the group. “You’d have to be. Either that, or crazy!” Although later, it occurred to me that, despite this appearing to be a reference to her parental status, Naomi does

have a calm, embracing and warm personality, and it may have been these qualities which were the inspiration for the “maternal” comment.

Yeah. But [about other comments] you think, “Oh! Ah! Wow! That’s how I came across,” just after 3 days.

The other thing that struck me was how BONDED you can become in 3 days with people you’ve never met before.

“It is a very bonding experience, isn’t it?” I agree, reminded of how affronted Naomi had first been when Peter had discussed with her how he’d bonded with his colleagues during his own earlier MESH experience.

Yeah. And, you can work with someone for years and not get to know them as well as you know someone you’ve spent 3 days with. It’s fascinating. Naomi reinforces the view I’ve heard others express of the intimate bonding nature of the group experience.



“The defence thing”

Prior to her attendance at the MESH workshop, it was Naomi’s hope that an outcome of the course would be that she might begin *to feel more confident and more capable of doing some programs at school, like getting a bit deeper into emotional issues and trying to sort things out and know what to say and what to do when kids tell you something, instead of just going on instinct really. I don’t know, maybe instinct’s what you do anyway, but I just feel that if I do something like this I might increase my confidence. I act quite confidently, but inside I’m thinking, “Am I saying the right thing?” Perhaps I’m wondering if the social worker would say, “Oh, God! You shouldn’t say that!”*

◆◆◆ MESH experience ◆◆◆

In the week following MESH, Naomi had a chance to reflect on some of the things she’d learned during the PD. *The defences were really interesting, and that was both personally and professionally. ‘Cos I can look at kids now and say, “Oh, okay, his defences are really working well.” And I’ve actually done that just this week. I’ve seen kids behaving badly, and I’ve thought, “There’s something wrong with that child. They’re not very happy.” I think I sort of always did see that a bit, but I can see now that’s a defensive action. They’re really worried about something.*

We’ve got a girl in Grade 5, Laura, who’s had a pretty bad background with abuse and stuff, but she is actually a really nice girl, and I really like her and I really hope she actually makes something

of her life. I think she can if she can get on the right path.

She's had a lot of friendship issues in the last few weeks 'cos there's a new girl in there who's created LOTS of problems, with a similar background, and she's not happy. Laura's had a big friendship bust-up with a girl that she's been friends with for a long time and yesterday I was talking to the social worker about her and she'd actually rung up this girl that she was friends with, but had a fight [with] last week, to say, "I don't want to be your friend anyway." And I said to the social worker, "But in actual fact she rang her up to say, 'Please, I want to be your friend again,' but that's not what she said." And the social worker said, "Yeah, that's true. That's what happened."

And I thought that [understanding about people's defences] might've helped me to realise that that's what she was actually phoning up to say, "I'm really sad that our friendship's dissolved," but what she actually said was, "I hate you and I don't want to be your friend anyway."

"Mm, she was feeling rejected and that was her defence."

Yeah. Attack, attack. She's attacking and blaming, "Well, it's her fault."

Developmentally, this was a long way from her original concerns about the appropriateness of her interactions with students. Naomi has been able to comment upon a student's behaviour and have her perceptions of the situation validated by the social worker. *I think it has made me a bit more confident, and I think it's confirmed a lot of things that I've sort of been doing anyway.*

Naomi brings the conversation back to her understandings of her own defences and the ways in which she protects herself. *The defence thing; I looked at those and I thought, "I could almost tick every one of them off. Yep, do that. Yep, do that."* She laughs at how many defences she has become accustomed to using. *And I think it's just a common human thing, that we all do almost all of them.*

"They keep us safe. If we're too scared to confront something it's just easier to turn and run, or to shut off, or to be angry."

That was the other thing I thought, I found myself folding my arms a lot and I thought, "I wonder if that's a defence?" That's the body language of keeping yourself safe. And I noticed I was doing that a lot.



"Not that I really want to be like that, but I see that I am"

My mother never showed her feelings, never, and I think my upbringing has just always been that

you don't. Even when I had to tell her that Dad was dying, I think she was in her remote-control wheelchair at the time, and she just was quite quiet. She didn't cry, and she just said, "Oh, I'm just gonna go outside" and she just wheeled around outside. I mean she must've been feeling it, but she didn't ever show it. And she didn't ever get really close with us. She was a very private person. So, I see myself in her a lot. Not that I really want to be like that, but I see that I am like that, a lot.



Naomi was quite interested in the dynamics apparent in the family sculpture activity. *I related it more to my parents, 'cos my father drank a lot, in fact he was an alcoholic. He drank and smoked heavily. And would drink every single day. And I don't think even Mum realised until he had his hip replacement when he was in his sixties, and the day after he had it he went into withdrawal and they had to put him into ICU because he'd withdrawn from cigarettes and alcohol and he was very sick, and yeah, I remember Mum being very embarrassed about it, Naomi laughs as she recalls the memory of her mother's discomfort. She was really embarrassed.*

He used to come home and he'd go to give Mum a cuddle. She'd say, "Oh, get out of it. Get out of it!" and push him off. I never actually saw them being affectionate.

"That's interesting, isn't it, with nine children?"

Yeah, yeah. So they must've been affectionate sometime, but I never saw that. Ever. I never remember sitting on my mother's knee; never remember having a cuddle with Mum. She just wasn't an affectionate person. Yeah, and even with Dad she said, "Oh, get off! Oh, get out of it!" I can just hear her saying it. She just wouldn't. Yeah.

"Isn't that strange?" I comment, perhaps unwisely.

Yeah! So, I thought, "Oh! How much has that affected me?"

"You said something earlier about not being very physically affectionate, didn't you?"

Yeah! I'm not very. And I feel I should be more.

"Do you think that's because you're aware that your mother wasn't?"

Yeah, and I didn't like that. I mean I'm really affectionate with the little ones, and as they get older you just sort of lose that affection. I remember we had to go and give Mum a kiss goodnight, but it was just like a peck and that was it and it was just something you did. You didn't really want to do it. You just had to do it. It was almost a bit embarrassing, and a bit uncomfortable.

I'm a bit more conscious of it [being physically affectionate] with Serena, 'cos she's Grade 7 now, and she's actually a bit more of an outgoing and affectionate person than my older daughter, who's

21 and very quiet. I'm actually trying physically harder to do that with her; have a closer and more affectionate relationship.



“I’ve worked through things, and I feel really good now”

A year after her MESH training, Naomi tells me that she has left Firestone Primary and is working instead at *Abbey Road Primary*. *It’s a little bit different in some ways to Firestone, but there are similarities. It’s a lot more enjoyable to work in. It’s a nicer environment, and it hasn’t quite got such a DESPERATE atmosphere as Firestone. I mean there’s lots of difficulties and lots of families with lots of difficulties, but the principal’s fantastic there, and that makes a HUGE difference, I think. She’s much more into the kids side of it; a very positive person. She’s very active; she’s in the playground all the time. Because it’s a relatively small school, about 200 [students], it’s small enough to have that intimacy, but it’s large enough to be able to DO more things. I really like working there.*

For Naomi, finding work at Abbey Road provides a welcome relief; another year of financial security. She had been *ABSOLUTELY devastated* when a position that she had expected would be hers had *fallen through*. *I did a bit of relief [teaching] and after Easter I got full-time at Firestone until the end of first term ’cos someone went on leave, but after that there was nothing for me. And so I was out of a job altogether. I really tried to stay at Firestone, ’cos I’d established myself there. I’d been there 14 months and I had good relationships with the kids, and I thought, “Oh, yeah, this’ll do. I’m happy here,” but it just wasn’t to be. I mean the principal there was trying to employ me, but couldn’t; there just wasn’t a job.*

Naomi stops for a minute to chat to her son, Aaron, and to offer him a snack, before telling her daughter that *the kids programs are on in the kids’ room, Henna*. The little girl toddles off to see if there is anything on television that interests her. During our three interviews, I was conscious that Naomi had just finished a hard day’s work and that I was interrupting her family’s usual afternoon routines. However, she never appeared to mind my presence and always warmly welcomed me into her home.

The principal from Abbey Road had spoken to Naomi, telling her that if she didn’t have work she should contact the principal, so she’d summoned up some courage and had done that. *She e-mailed me back straight away and said, “Yep, I’ve got .8⁷ for you.*

⁷ In Tasmania, a full-time position in a school involves working five days per week. As a basis for understanding Naomi’s conversation, being employed at .8 FTE (full-time equivalent) equates to working four full days per week, or equivalent in hours.

Come and see me.” And then the next day, she said, “Actually, I’ve got full-time if you want,” and I thought, “Phwah!” And it’s doing different things, but it’s great.

So, I’ve been full-time there since the start of Term 2. So, 3 days a week up ’til lunch time I do what we call “Literacy Lift-off,” which is a literacy program for Grade 3-6s – the kids that are struggling a bit. So I have small groups. Four or five kids in each group doing that. I do a bit of support on Monday and Wednesday afternoons with the special needs kids and Thursday I teach Program Achieve⁸ all through the school; and that’s wonderful. I love doing that. So, I teach every class on Thursdays, half an hour each, which is not much a week, but still it’s consistent and it’s a dedicated time, and it’s the same person doing it all through the school, so it’s a good way to do it, I think. And Fridays I take the Grade 3/4 ’cos the AST2⁹ has his day off [class].

Naomi explains that although she hasn’t been able to run a support group at the school, she understands that by providing a listening ear to *the kids that are from difficult families* that need to *get things off their chest* she is providing a valuable service; *a bit of advice and a bit of support* to these children who *crave the attention*. *They’re very low in literacy [skills], so [when] they go back [to class] a lot of it’s right over their heads. No matter how much you plan for them, a lot of it is still going to go over their heads because they’ve got really low IQs. They haven’t actually got the ability to cope with what goes on.* We’re both conscious that these children compare their abilities and progress to that of other students in their classes and are aware that they are not doing very well, academically, at school. *They work out pretty quickly who’s the dumbest, or cleverest, of their class.* Naomi also believes that for some of these children, a regular school setting is not appropriate for their needs.

I return to our conversation about the variety of roles Naomi performs at Abbey Road. “So, you’re switching from one thing to another all week, but you like that?”

Yeah! I do! I love it. I love it. I mean if I was on class I’d love it too, because you have your own class and you do your own thing and make your own mistakes, but this is good too ’cos there’s just such variety.

“Yes, you look like you’re enjoying it.” Naomi is transparently enthusiastic when talking about her work.

⁸ “Program Achieve is a ... curriculum of lessons for teaching students in years 1 to 12 how to achieve success and develop social-emotional well-being.” The program “focuses on teaching students the Five Foundations (Confidence, Persistence, Organisation, Getting Along & Resilience) that together constitute a positive mindset for developing their academic potential.” (You Can Do It! Education, n.d.)

⁹ Advanced Skills Teacher level 2.

Yeah, I do. I love it. I really do like it. So, I'm hoping to stay there next year, but I'm still temporary.

Naomi describes how *really stressful* and *unsettling* the uncertainty over her employment had been. *And I had day care ¹⁰ booked, so I have to pay hundreds of dollars of day care, thinking "How am I gonna pay for that?" and people say, "Oh, no, don't worry about it. Something'll come up." But you think, "Well, I do have to worry about it because something MAY NOT come up!" But the further on I go, the more certain I am that I won't be without a job, and I'm feeling pretty secure now. I think I'm known enough in enough schools now to pick up something.*

"It must also give you some confidence, too, to know that the principal at Abbey Road sought you out to talk with you. Your name must be getting around as being someone who's reliable and good at what you do, and, if so, that's excellent, isn't it?"

Yeah, yeah. Well, I know that I work well with those sorts of kids, and some people don't. And you've gotta have a lot of patience, but you've gotta have the right balance, I suppose. Patience, and a bit of kindness, but also a bit of firmness. And I enjoy it. And, I mean, if you enjoy doing stuff like that then that comes through as well, doesn't it?



In contrast, I am sorry to hear that the accumulated stresses over a period of years – her parents' illnesses and deaths, the difficulties she's encountered in her two marriages, and the uncertainty over her job – have taken their toll on Naomi's health and have led to the onset of depression. *I remember Easter I felt pretty crap, and was very teary. We had a big PD session the day after I'd been told at Firestone that I didn't have a job and that just was the last straw, and I felt really awful the next day. Very depressed and down with everything. About 2 months after that I went to my doctor, who's lovely and she's been through all this with me, and she said, "I think it's time we had some antidepressants." And I went, "Oh, no!" but I did and since then I just feel much better. They're very mild, non-addictive ones. They just help. I've worked through things, and I feel really good now. So, yeah, I'm quite happy.*

"Oh, that's good." I'm pleased for Naomi that she feels that she is now coping a bit better with the stresses of her life, while at the same time I feel concerned for her that she has been diagnosed with depression and prescribed antidepressants.

Yeah! Oh, it's taken a year! she laughs at what has obviously been an extremely difficult

¹⁰ Day care is child care in a private home by a registered carer.

and stressful time of coming to terms with the many changes in her life.

We talk a little about how the same patterns had been present in her second marriage as in her first. *And the second time around you sort of think, "Oh, this is it. This'll be right this time." And oh! It's so disillusioning when it doesn't work out like that.*

"And do you think you'd realised before MESH that that was happening, or did it suddenly hit home?"

Yeah, I think I did. And I said to Peter the other night, "We've always had different priorities, it's just that now we've got children it's a lot more difficult.

"And it is with kids, isn't it? Everything's intensified. There's more of everything."

Yep. Absolutely. And 'cos Mum and Dad had died a few years before that, and all these things. I'd had a horrible time! But, yeah, I feel good now.

"You look good! You look really bright and happy." The difference between how Naomi had looked a year ago and how she looks now is quite startling to me. Her eyes appear brighter, her expression is happier, even her posture has changed; she is presenting a much more confident face to the world, or to me at least.

Yeah. I know. I do. Yes! Yeah.

"So, you've come through okay in the end."

Yes. I knew I would! But it's just getting there.



"A real human resource"

The first thing that springs to mind is how fragile I was at the time, I think. That's personally what springs to mind [in reflecting on my time at MESH]. The other thing is it was such a great experience, personally and professionally. It gave you lots of insights into lots of things, too many to list almost.

It was really a cleansing thing personally, but also it just loaded you with information that helps you work with these kids, well with all people really, not just those sort of kids. I suppose, a real human resource, where you got so much information about what people might do and think and why they do those things.

The best thing about it was the amount of information there was, and how things were reinforced. Things I thought, by instinct almost, I then had some facts to put behind those. You know, "I've

noticed these kids do this and this and this,” and then I could think, “Oh, well they do that because they’re in this sort of family.” You had a much better understanding of families and how people work and all those vices out there that come to tempt everybody.

Professionally, I think the most helpful thing was that here’s something I can do that’s actually going to make a difference. And I think it actually has the potential to make a big difference.



I can’t help but reflect back to my first interview with Naomi and her comment that it was *a waste of time getting teachers to do that [MESH] when they should be learning about teaching*. When I read that section of the transcript back to Naomi,¹¹ she is surprised; unable to recognise her own words. *Is that what I said? That’s what I thought?*

She laughs and says, *I probably wouldn’t say that now!*



Peter arrives home towards the end of my interview with Naomi. He lingers in the kitchen making himself a coffee. I am aware that his presence has dampened the congenial atmosphere in the room substantially.

“Do you believe that your MESH experience resulted in any outcomes which are enduring, personally or professionally?” I ask, conscious that Peter is within earshot, and the effect that his presence may have on Naomi’s answer to my interview question.

Oh, probably lots. I suppose the level of understanding you come to is enduring, of yourself and of kids that you teach. Um, family life. Yeah, once you understand all that, you carry that on. Personally, there’s probably a lot, too, that’s fairly enduring. Naomi gives an awkward laugh as she hedges around the issues, acknowledging with eye contact the difficulty of having Peter listening.

They were hard questions, she says, as though our interview is over.

Peter wanders out onto the terrace with the children, giving Naomi the chance to talk sincerely and openly once more. “Is there anything now?” I ask.

That was a bit tricky, Naomi laughs.

¹¹ Somewhat akin to “Hermans’s (1992) ‘self-confrontation’ procedure in which individuals, interviewed a second time about important events in their lives some time after the first interview, are given back their responses and asked whether they agree or disagree with them and how they would now respond” (Mishler, 2004, p. 118).

“So, personally or professionally anything enduring that you can mention?”

I think I actually got to know myself a bit better. I think that's fairly enduring, and I think that things like that I do give myself a hard time, and the guilt that I feel, I shouldn't be feeling. Things like that are pretty enduring, and I've learnt from that, and I'm just not gonna go do that again.
She laughs again.

“Okay. That's good.”

Yeah! It IS good. It's wonderful. And you know, especially in my situation I thought, “Well, if this doesn't work out, okay, it's not actually his fault, it's not actually my fault, it's just something that happens.” Why do you blame anybody? There's no point. And I guess then you learn to forgive people, forgive yourself and other people that've had a hand in it. Things just happen sometimes. You go looking for someone to blame, you're forever looking. Forever, you know, giving yourself a hard time, and other people a hard time, and you just [need to] move on.

“So, that's quite a good outcome, I guess, for you.”

Yeah! Yeah, that's true. I couldn't stand to do [again] what I did to my children [in ending my first marriage], I just thought it was just the most awful thing, and because it's such a selfish thing, because I was doing it for ME, and you know. That was really confronting for me, because the sacrifice thing. I just thought, “Well, you should sacrifice EVERYthing for your children,”

“And do you think differently now?”

She sighs, Yeah. In that situation it's worked out and it's fine, but you know, you wonder if it hadn't worked out, what, or how you'd feel. And now that, you know, it's sort of all come up AGAIN, I just think, “Well, I'm just not gonna do it again. I'm not gonna be the one to go. I'll be the one to stay, and what will be will be, but I'll be okay if I'm on my own. I'll be right. And I'm quite confident about that.

“And you don't think it's fixable, what you've got here already?”

Um, possibly, but I don't think so. I think it's more too entrenched personality-wise. I mean I've done a lot of things that I didn't think I'd do in an effort to, you know, I've done the fighting I think.

“The fighting to ... ?”

To save things, and to get things better, but it hasn't really happened.

“Mm, and you didn't think you'd fight to save your marriage?”

Yes, I always thought I would. I suppose I still am, by not actually going. But I don't want to go. There are other issues that have come into it now. I'm not prepared to live in a tiny house and scratch my way pay-day to pay-day. I just don't want to do that. And that sounds very selfish.

“No, not at all. So, there's security for you in keeping it the way it is?”

Yes. For me and for the children. I thought, "I'm not gonna drag them around and do all that." Ugh! It just sends shudders down my spine to do it. And I suppose as a teacher you SEE all the to-ing and fro-ing and although I did it before and it was very amicable, and the kids were always happy, it's still not, ideal, and I just think, "Well, I think it would be better if I just stayed," 'cos I don't want to go anywhere.

“Mm, so for the moment this is kind of the best of both worlds?”

Yes! That's, it's the best option, I think, at the moment. And it probably will change 'cos I don't really see it, you know. Looking objectively it's not, probably not going to be sustainable. However, I'm not prepared to do anything at this stage. And I don't want to unsettle things, and I feel quite settled. And happy enough.

“And you look like you're coping really well.”

Yeah! Yeah.

“And NOT giving yourself a hard time.”

No! No, I'm not. I'm not, because I've just done too much of that, and you just end up down in the dumps all the time. I HATE feeling like that. I'm not gonna do it any more.

I can't help wondering how Peter feels about Naomi's participation in the MESH training, given the outcomes for her personally.



Leaving Naomi

Naomi once said to me that it felt to her as though we've known each other all our lives. It felt good to hear her say that, because that's how it feels for me, too. While she was described as “maternal” by another group member, I can also recognise in Naomi a childlike quality, and I can't help but feel protective of her.

My happiness that she is finding her new teaching and support position so enjoyable and rewarding, and that she appears to be coping with her new marital arrangement, is tempered by my knowledge that she has been prescribed antidepressant drugs in

order to help her cope with the stresses in her life.

Despite my concerns for Naomi, as I leave the field I must let her go. My heart reaches out to her, and I wish her well on her life's journey.

Chapter 8

Patrick Jamieson

*"I'm not a total believer in ...
always talking about your problems"*

Patrick Jamieson's suggestion of a meeting place for our first interview taught me about the hazards of arranging interview locations. Patrick had recommended a five o'clock meeting at a popular, up-market bar and grill in the heart of the city. I'd subtly tried to relocate the meeting place by informing him that I'd need to record the interview, and that it would be good if we could find a reasonably quiet place. However, being a Monday, he'd rather naturally assumed we'd be able to find a quiet spot outside.

Finding our meeting place was easy enough, but locating Patrick proved a little more difficult. I realised, too late, that I had no idea of Patrick's physical appearance. This resulted in me approaching a number of men who were sitting alone, and asking, "Excuse me. Are you Patrick?" I gave up on this tactic after the last man I approached replied that he wasn't, but that if I'd been "stood up" he would be happy to have me sit down with him instead. I declined his offer politely, then moved on rather hastily, found an empty table, and phoned Patrick's mobile number giving him enough information to locate me.

Sitting outside, the music from overhead stereo speakers, the chatter from the gregarious after-work crowd and noise from the busy rush-hour traffic stretched the capacities of both my tape and digital voice recorders and, later, my ears as I worked hard to transcribe our conversation.

After first asking a little about my study, Patrick begins by telling me about his work. He's been teaching at Clovelly School since he was at uni, *so that's quite a few years. A long time, but it's not like the one job. I've worked for three different principals and each time it's been totally different. The school is quite dynamic. A lot of people have a very preconceived view*

about the school, which is not necessarily true. It is quite a progressive school.

“So there’s tradition there, but it’s progressive as well?” I ask, hoping to confirm my interpretation of what people may believe about the school.

Yeah, yeah, and it’s a nice place to work.

Patrick explains that, during the time when he was still studying at uni, he had completed a practicum placement at Clovelly, *and what I really noticed is the staff very much were a team and they all seemed like really nice, interesting people. I thought they were a really vibrant, good staff. They went out of their way to help me, and I found that really refreshing. All staff support each other and there’s a nice friendly atmosphere. That really stuck out.*



“Underneath, people do like learning that’s challenging”

Patrick currently teaches lower secondary students. In a prior role as academic co-ordinator, one of his tasks was the implementation of a system to provide elective subjects to students throughout the school. He views this task as one of the highlights of his career thus far. He believes his involvement in the project gave him new and surprising insights into student engagement in learning.

The elective system that we have enables the Grade 8s to choose almost half their subjects, although there are governing rules. But, the process of allowing them to choose, we found, was really good at getting the kids engaged. The boss at the time was really concerned that Grade 8s, particularly, lose interest in school, and so he was looking for ways of getting them engaged. The idea he came up with was that kids really like to be given a bit of choice, to make them feel they’re part of the decision[-making process].

What I found really interesting is that kids who were really interested in what we were doing were the kids who had not been very interested in school up until that point. And they, really, were the ones sticking up their hands and asking questions and going, “Oh! So we can choose to do....” And I found that really fascinating, that the kids that we thought were not really interested in school, it wasn’t that. It was just that they hadn’t found subjects that they were interested in. They’d never been asked for their opinions. You know, they were actually asked, like an adult, “What do you think?” “What if we offered this subject?” “What would be interesting to you?” And, although the process was quite complicated, I think one of the big things that’s come out of it is the kids have been through this process of thinking about what they want to do.

The sort of [course] counselling the Grade 7 kids got from their tutors, and from all staff really, created a lot of good interaction between the kids and the teachers. When you think about the wider world, and why a lot of kids are losing interest in school, I think [that by excluding them from the curriculum decision-making process] we're doing them a big disservice.

From my experience, teachers are bending over backwards to make work easier [for students]. I think there's an element, in education, of watering it down to make it easier, thinking it's going to make kids like it more. I think you actually need to give them something they're interested in and challenge them. Stimulate their minds, because their minds are becoming TV-orientated and media-orientated and they don't actually think very much any more, and underneath there's that desire – people like thinking, you know. People still read the newspaper when they're 60. They like learning. Underneath, people do like learning that's challenging. I think that's sometimes overlooked.



“The ‘lucky’ country”

As we sit amidst the noisy, after-work bustle of the bar, Patrick talks about one of his concerns; the direction in which he believes Australian society is heading.¹

The world is so complicated, and it worries me where we're going, as a society. Particularly Australia, which I used to think was the “lucky” country, and now I think it's not so lucky. I try to compare it with New Zealand, which has a slightly different philosophy to Australia now. A much nicer philosophy. Australia's really becoming a little America.

I think we've entered into a really weird stage. We've got the second highest car ownership in the world, one of the highest credit card debts, we're one of the biggest gambling nations in the world, and have a high depression rate. In a country that, we have everything, and yet we're very depressed as a nation. I think that's a worrying thing.

Death of parents, separations, illness, and just stress in kids – I'm sure kids are more stressed today than they have been 20 years ago, unless you've got half a brain and don't know what's going on in the world. Kids do. It reflects on them, maybe a little bit deeper than adults. Adults can talk about it, you know, like “This is stuffed, and this is stuffed,” but kids will just keep it inside a bit more.

I think counselling needs to be well thought through, though. I mean, I'm not a great believer in times of real tragedy and stress, getting people in and debriefing them straight away and talking it

¹ During the negotiation of the research text in early 2008, Patrick made it clear to me that his “views have changed quite a bit” since data generation at this first interview late in 2004. He believes that “the political/environmental/social attitude in Australia has changed a lot in the last 18 months.”

through. I think often people, you know, it's again a bit of an American thing, where this sort of grief counselling is all, you know. Sometimes you just need to walk away and spend a bit of time on your own.

Patrick has done some PD in counselling skills in the past. In relation to dealing with student issues, however, *I'd have to say that a lot of what I would draw on would be my own life experience, which has been pretty broad. Even though I've been in the one job for a long time, my life is interesting outside of work as well. When I was at uni I did things like drive taxis, and I reckon I learned more psychology driving taxis – your life depends on it; to weigh people up pretty quickly. I've worked on building sites and in other places, and not all my friends are professional people. I have a range of friends, and I like that. I don't want my kids to mix with just one type of person.*

I've always been interested in emotional development. My mother was a marriage guidance counsellor. As a kid growing up I used to be quite skeptical of how she counselled people. She was just a listener. She would listen to people and they'd [the people themselves would] sort out their problems. Maybe it's a male thing, but I'd say, "No, no, you've got to just tell them what to do."

◆◆◆ MESH experience ◆◆◆

We sit in Patrick's office, a year after he completed the MESH workshop. He reclines in his office chair, hands behind his head, and legs out-stretched. His gaze travels out the window and over the school yard. Students' voices call out and an umpire's whistle blows indicating a game in progress on the ball courts.

Human beings haven't changed all that much, really. The issues we face now are certainly more complicated, but the underlying things that make humans happy haven't changed at all. It's even more important that kids need to know that, in [these] days of iPods and stuff, and the way commercialism has got out of control in the Western world, how our society's heading at the moment is quite worrying. [There's that attitude of] the more you get the happier you'll be, and it's all over the place, and kids still need to hear that [that's not what brings happiness]. Some of the basic things don't change.

The world has become a much more complicated place, [and] MESH helps you [to be able to deal with that] in a sense. When I started teaching, I'm sure kids had issues, and to keep up with that you really need constant retraining, and to be pretty clued up yourself, and I think that MESH does give you a bit of a foundation that perhaps wasn't so necessary 20 years ago. By and large people got through. But I think you're getting such a range of problems now, and the world has changed. Kids need to be more resilient, and they need to develop skills that were emphasised in the course; not

carrying too much baggage with you and just getting rid of the stuff that you don't really need that can wear you down.

Listening to the stories told by his colleagues and the others at the workshop, Patrick was better able to picture their problems, and realise [that] to them it was a MAJOR issue, but being an outside observer, although I could relate to a lot of what they were saying, I got the impression that they were being helped a lot by talking about it. And, a lot of them, I think, in that situation, got over whatever it was that they'd been harbouring.

"So you did see some benefit for those people, just by being able to talk about issues?" I ask. I feel that Patrick's opinion about how people can best deal with issues in their lives has altered in the time that has passed between interviews.

Oh, ABSOLUTELY, yeah.

"How does that fit with your mother and the way she would just sit and listen in her counselling role?"

Yeah, that's a good question. Um, I'd still probably believe that, at some stage, you need advice from someone who's a little bit more experienced than you are in life, whether or not you choose to take that advice is the problem. With teenage kids you know that lecturing won't work. You've got to subtly ease them into things, and then they seem to come around. Even if they don't totally come around, bit by bit they start to see the logic in it. Teenagers today, if they have ever, do not like being lectured to. And they'll often do the opposite. But if they've got someone close to them they know that will listen to them, and not be judgmental, and [that they] know will always be there for them, that's a huge step.

I think girls in the teenage years, don't want someone to tell them what to do. They want someone to listen. But the bottom line of that is that they don't want bad advice in the sense that [that] can make their problem worse. But they do need someone to listen to them.

The MESH process has caused Patrick to be more reflective. And a little bit more careful and more reflective that what I say can have [such an influence], I probably did [know] that before, but [I'm more conscious now that] what you say to someone in a critical situation can have a big impact on them.



"Facts and figures and stats and stories and a bit of humour"

I'd really warmed to the Clovelly school counsellor, Gordon Royce, when we had

participated in a MESH group together in mid-2003. Since that time, and on Gordon's recommendation, the school has enrolled quite a number of staff – the principal, house heads, and other senior teaching staff – to participate in MESH workshops. Patrick is one of six teachers to enrol in this intake.²

I'm a lower secondary tutor, and that's seen as our main role. Pastoral care's seen as the most important part of our job. They're always telling you that. And it is. Your own tutor group is the people you get closest to. We have almost a primary [school] system where they try to limit the number of teachers the students have; [Grade] 7 and 8s are separate.

Staff turn-over within the school is low, perhaps because they're a fairly close-knit group. *And being a small staff room, you don't often NOT talk about the kids, even if it's just sort of casually, so kids don't escape [attention] easily, which I think is a big plus.* Patrick contrasts the experience of students attending Clovelly with his daughter's educational experience. *Kelsey had three different teachers in Grade 6, and one was a relief teacher who didn't do anything with her for a whole term. And I know how that affected her.*

Patrick admits that his personal experience has given him some insight into the stress that the breakdown of the family unit can place on students. This insight has fuelled his desire to further his knowledge of appropriate ways to help students cope with these issues.

I guess I'm very aware of when kids are going through problems at home and [what I'd heard about] MESH seemed to be touching on some of those issues, which are pretty common. Despite the problems that he recognises as prevalent in our society, Patrick acknowledges that the situation in Clovelly, which is an independent school, is somewhat better than in many other schools. He's aware, for example, that they *don't have that many separated parents, compared to the norm in public schools.*

Based upon what he'd heard from colleagues who had previously attended the workshops, Patrick believes that MESH *seemed like a bit of an immersion into how society is operating in this sort of complex world.*

Referring to the MESH flyer, Patrick comments that, *there was the stuff on dysfunctional families, and half the families are dysfunctional, you know. It's a dysfunctional world.*



Patrick is *always a bit apprehensive about PD, because you never quite know what it's going to be*

² A total of 33 members of Clovelly School staff attended MESH workshops over a 3-year period.

like. I didn't have a lot of knowledge [about MESH] really, only that I'd been told that it was really good, without going into the details of what it was about.

After rushing to prepare and submit lesson plans for the 3 days, and organise other teachers to cover his supervision duties before being able to take leave from school, Patrick's first impression of MESH was that it was *good, yeah. I thought it was really worthwhile. I was a bit concerned about the time-span, being totally immersed in it, but no, it was broken up into segments so I didn't find it too emotionally draining. I thought it was actually quite invigorating, yeah. I'd say that it met my expectations; probably more than what I expected it to.*

You sometimes go to seminars where you don't feel the people running them have much knowledge in the area. Nairn obviously knows her stuff and is still enthusiastic, although she's probably done it quite a few times. She definitely has a good knowledge in the area and a lot of wonderful ideas. She has a good mixture of facts and figures and stats and stories and a bit of humour, without too much of any of it really. She has a nice balance, plus the little activities thrown in; a few games. Yeah, it was good. It was very good, a very good presentation. It would have to be to keep people interested for so many hours a day for 3 days in a row!

Also it was a nice group. It was a lovely mix of people, you know, yourself included. I think it was nice having the group of us there [from Clovelly], but it was also good having people from outside. Because I can appreciate Vivienne ³ talking about the social welfare side of things, and people from different schools have different problems, to a degree. They're all diverse people, and ah, yeah, it's interesting to see what they have to say about their own lives that you wouldn't hear about normally.

And just a nice sense of humour. I think a few people said there were highs and lows, but there were quite a few good high points, and very funny things came out, and that was very entertaining.



I remind Patrick of the "step in and fix it" approach that he had talked about in our first interview, and ask how he compares that with the approach he was part of in the support group environment.

I found it hard. I don't think I coped well with the rules too much. I found myself thinking afterwards that a couple of times I said things when it wasn't my turn. I think I probably didn't relate as well as I thought I would, yeah.

"To other people?"

³ See Vivienne Deane's narrative account (p. 230).

Yeah, a couple of times I said things I probably should have thought [about] before I said them. I know that Patrick is aware of his tendency to occasionally “put his foot in his mouth,” so this is a useful insight for him to have gained.

Although people were talking and others were listening there was a sense of getting some advice. Not like just talking one-to-one, but the group dynamics enabled you to realise that your problems weren't just isolated, that other people had similar or more troubling problems, so in a way there was some overall therapy. That's probably not the right word, but...

“But you felt it was therapeutic?” I suggest, conscious that Patrick is being mindful of the important distinction Nairn had made between the support group he experienced and therapy groups.⁴

Yeah, you were getting advice, but not directly. Maybe it's a male thing, but I'm not a total believer in always talking about your problems. Talking about things that happened in the past doesn't always make it better, but you do need to get some things off your chest sometimes, yeah.

“Yeah, you do, don't you?!” I nod my agreement, before asking “How was it for you sharing parts of your story with other people?”

I don't know how well I did it.

“Is there a degree of wellness to it?”

No, well, that's a good point. It made me reflect on the fact that maybe some things in the past that I thought I'd gotten rid of were still there. And by sharing them with the group, I think if I did it again I'd do it better. Because I know that it doesn't mean anything any more. I was just surprised that some things that I thought were gone, were still affecting me, and I was surprised, a bit surprised at that, yeah. There is a hint of contradiction in Patrick's statement, as if he is still a little unsure of whether some things from his past still trouble him.



For Patrick, the workshop brought with it the opportunity to get to know aspects of, and insights into, his colleagues' lives that he may never have discovered otherwise. And he found some of the revelations took him completely by surprise and made it possible for him to see them in a new light. *As I said down there [at the workshop], I've worked with some of these people for 5 or 6 years and I had no idea, you know, I had no idea the things they'd been through and I can picture better when I'm working with them now. Yeah, I think*

⁴ “Therapy groups are directed to providing therapy for people with particular psychological problems” (Nichols & Jenkinson, 2006, p. 28).

you interact better with people that you really understand. You know when you can press them for things and when you should just leave it. I think you interact better with them.

Over the course of the 3 days, I noticed Patrick often wrote down information during the lecture-type sessions. *I took a lot of the stats down that she gave us. Everything she gave us was useful. There was a lot of information though, it was hard to keep up with it all, but it was all useful. I have to find time to look through the [MESH] manual, Patrick said. At over 300 pages, a “look through” to orient himself to the content is all that could be expected. I don’t think that matters, though, he says, referring to the size of the manual, I’d rather have more information than you need, than not enough.*

The most helpful aspects? Just being aware that kids’ lives are, I think someone had the quote, they look back at their class as not 30 students, but 30 individuals or 30 people with lives, and each one of those lives is valued. I think that’s important, yeah. So much of what we, not just dealing with kids, but with other adults, your opinion of the person is made up in, what is it, the first 30 seconds or something. The first impression is probably 90% of what you know about a person. So that must happen with your own students too, probably. You have a bit of a talk with them at the beginning of the year and think, “Oh, I sort of understand where they’re coming from.” But you’ve probably got no idea.

“That’s just the bit they choose to reveal to you,” I suggest to Patrick.

Yeah, yeah. And you often see more, like PE teachers or drama teachers will often tell you more about a kid than you know, and you might have them for a couple of different subjects and have taught them all year. Or you end up supervising a PE class and you see these kids in a different role, or at camps. We do a Grade 8 camp, and that’s a great one for seeing what kids are really like. It’s amazing the difference. And that’s why the strong policy is that you take sport here [at Clovelly], and the good thing about that is that the kids you teach in class, you see them in a totally different context. You see people in a different light. And I think, doing the [MESH] course, it makes you realise that you shouldn’t just take what you see in a classroom situation as being all there is to them.

I agree. My youngest daughter had been fairly disengaged from scholastic pursuits at her school over the preceding 2 years. However, when she’d participated in an abseiling camp, she received a glowing report from her outdoor education teacher, who commented very favourably on her leadership skills and her ability to encourage and support others who had struggled with the practical elements they had encountered outside their preferred academic domain. The senior staff member in

charge of students' welfare, aware that Sophie was having difficulty in other subject areas, had made a point of letting both Sophie and me know of Sophie's accomplishments at the camp. These reports stood in stark contrast to those of her classroom teachers, and Sophie was pleased that she had been recognised and acknowledged for the contribution that she made to the success of the camp.



During our second interview, in Patrick's office at Clovelly, he talks about how he is very keen to run a support group with his tutor group students. *Look, I think I'll use a lot of it. In my own tutor group, I plan to do the group activity.* As part of his plan, Patrick has considered whether to either halve his student group or to involve one of his colleagues, Jerry or Gordon, as a co-facilitator. He believes it may be difficult to *try it with the whole 24 of them. It would be an interesting thing to try with them. I'll do it regularly with each year group that I have in my own tutor group,* he plans very enthusiastically. And again, he reiterates his belief that *pastoral care comes into teaching any subject. I mean pastoral care is seen as our most important role here. Ever since I've been here it's been more or less that philosophy.*



"So were you able to run a support group with your class last year?" I ask in our final interview, following up our previous discussion.

No, Gerry was going to do that, and he started it, and I'm not sure how far that went. And whether he still meets with them I don't know, because he doesn't report back to us if he does. But I know he started it, yeah.

"Do you know if groups are being run in the school?" I'm interested to know what the school has implemented for students after sending so many staff members to the MESH workshops.

Well, I think Gordon's doing it with all the Grade 7s. Yeah, I'm sure all the Grade 7s are doing it. I mainly teach Grade 8. Jerry started with the group. Yeah, I'm sure that's part of their Personal Development [classes]. Yeah, I'm sure it's part of their course, Patrick continues. *I should know, I should obviously know, but, I'm, yeah, when I think about it, yeah, I'm sure they all do it,* says Patrick, sounding not quite so sure at all. *As part of PD.*



Patrick recalls how he had really appreciated the opportunities during the group sessions when participants were encouraged to give and receive feedback. He

particularly liked this aspect of the closing group, *the way that you finished up with your certificate, where Nairn actually got people to say [something positive about each other person in the group] and she wrote that down [on the back of our certificates]. I thought that was a really good thing to do. And it was the fact that she did say "positive."*

"It's nice to give feedback and receive it, isn't it?"

Yeah, yeah, definitely both, because you don't often DO that as adults, and I think kids would really like to hear those [positive comments from others about themselves]. Even in a classroom, even if the guy next to you you think is a "dipstick," I mean there's nearly always something you can say about him. Like, "You add to the classroom environment."

I agree. "There'd be some aspect of most people that you could comment about positively."

Yeah, and with boys particularly, well, with any high school kids, if you reinforce it's going to be something positive. If you just said, "Say something about the person next to you to share with..." you know. Teenage boys, then, yeah, righto, "You stink!" you know. "Your sister looks like a witch." You'd end up in a big brawl.

"Yes, that'd be awful, wouldn't it?" I laugh, clearly imagining what could happen without the use of the "positive" qualifier.

Positive reinforcement would be really nice.

"I've found that people like that, mostly." I speak from my experience of observing numerous group participants' reactions to the feedback sessions over the period of my study. "It's just a pleasant thing that we don't do often enough in society."

No. Well, the whole thing is quite alien to most people, that is, sitting down with a group of adults talking about deep and meaningful STUFF. When most of us, even when we're talking to another adult, it's probably because we've got the TV going and they're sitting next to us, or we're listening to music, or just idle chatter really.

I agree with Patrick's views on contemporary interpersonal communication in our society. "It's interesting to go a bit deeper sometimes," I suggest, thinking about how the MESH group format allows people who are open to the experience to do this.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's more like the old village where people communicated a bit more.

"Sadly, we don't do that much nowadays."

No. And there's a connection between people in a village that you don't get in our society now

because everyone's sort of independent.

“Yes, we’re all locked up in our little boxes by ourselves.”

Yeah, I think 25% of households now are single people. ⁵

“Are they?” I query, surprised by the statistics Patrick is suggesting.

He did a quick mental computation, *Within Australia, that's four million.*

“You like your stats,” I laugh.

Yeah, I like some of those stats. It's a lot though, like four million people. Out of twenty. Are single. Patrick's short, staccato-like phrasing emphasises the importance of the point he's making.

“That's a lot.”

Yeah.

During the editing process, however, I realised that the statistics Patrick had quoted related to households, not population. Even so, in one out of every four homes, for one reason or another, a person is living alone.



Patrick has integrated the feedback activity he'd enjoyed at MESH, and later commented so favourably about, into his work with his tutor group at the school.

In pastoral matters my practices have probably changed a bit. I did a bit of circle thing at work at the end of the year, particularly. I found it useful where they sat in a circle on the last day I think it was, and I got each person to say something nice about the person in question and I wrote, I had a certificate, I've got it here somewhere, “Congratulations, you've been a great member of 8PJ” and gave them that certificate, and by and large, that really was a good way to finish the year. It really settled them down. They realised they'd been on quite a path, a journey, during the year, and I've actually got one of the certificates sitting up on the wall, and not many kids have asked me about it, it just says “Congratulations, you've been a great member of 8PJ,” so it's there and they would've read it, and they probably wondered what that was about, but it's a bit of a seed, so at the end of the year I'll do the same thing.

“Mm, I remember you saying at the last interview that the sessions where we gave and received positive feedback had impressed you. As a society, we don't tend to do

that very often.”

No, we don't. We don't say nice things about colleagues, and we don't say nice things about our peers, you know, and I'm thinking of the kids there, they often say not-so-nice things, and it was really good for one or two kids in the class who have had real trouble understanding what it meant by positive [feedback] terms.

“Really?” So often, it seems, kids get language directed at them as a “put down,” rather than a “pick-me-up.” And they learn from this modelling.

Yeah, they, I had to stop one or two, because they just didn't get it, you know. When it came to them, they sat up very quickly and wanted to listen, but they were the ones that were more interested in themselves, and found it hard to say something nice about other kids they didn't particularly like. So I thought for them, more than the others, it was very productive.

“A good exercise for them just to go through.”

And another very important thing of MESH is to try to get kids to see how other people see them.

“Mm. That can be a positive thing, or a learning exercise, I guess.”

Well, it's a stage in maturity if they can actually start to reflect on the fact that other people see them differently, and their behaviour's not necessarily great, even though they probably think themselves [that] it's fine, [it's important] that they get to that stage where they can appreciate that other people see them differently.

“Mm, a bit of input from someone else doesn't hurt occasionally.”

More than input from other people, it's getting to that stage where they can reflect on themselves and not just see the whole world's against them, or it's the other kid's problem. They have to get to the stage of accepting that some of their behaviour causes the problems that they have. Rather than blaming, because we live in a society where a lot of people are just willing to blame everybody around them and not take any responsibility themselves. So yeah, it's helping them to take some responsibility for what's going on.



“What's the first thing that springs to mind when you recall your training in the MESH program?” I ask Patrick a year after his group experience.

Just how useful it was, and how well thought out the program was, and [there was] no sort of wasted

⁵ 25.9% of total occupied private dwellings in Tasmania are classed as “lone person households” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, Dwelling characteristics section).

time. I thought all the time was pretty productive.

“Okay, so when you say ‘useful,’ in what way was it useful to you?” I dig deeper.

Just giving me a bit more understanding of how people that you know quite well, or don’t know, have different sides to them, that you’re probably not aware of, and making yourself a little bit more aware of where people are coming from.

“So, do you mean different to how you’d previously have understood them?”

Yeah, and being more tolerant, and more understanding and also makes you think about where you’re coming from yourself, I guess.

“Mm. Okay. What did it make you think about as far as yourself, then?”

Oh, [that’s] going back a fair bit of time.

“That’s the whole point,” I smile, reasonably sure that Patrick is trying to avoid talking about himself.

Mm, things I thought I’d resolved in my own mind, perhaps I hadn’t, he concludes reflectively.



MESH “in 30 seconds”

Patrick tells me that he has recommended the MESH course to a young friend who is a social worker, but believes, too, that the program would appeal to a much wider audience. *She’s had a pretty disjointed life herself, and I think as a social worker you’ve gotta get all that stuff out of your own system if you want to help other people. People I know that’ve done social work have had some major issues themselves, I think.*

“And that’s how they’ve ended up doing social work?” I question whether it is Patrick’s belief that biography influences the choice to become a social worker.⁶

Yeah, a few do. They just want to sort out their own lives by doing social work, but I think, in this day and age, you really need to be a fairly well thought-through person. Maybe not. But if you’re still trying to work out your own problems and then deal with others’ [problems], I think that’s putting a big load on yourself.

But I would highly recommend it for her, or any social worker. Anybody. It doesn’t have to be in a

⁶ The connection between background and social workers’ career choice is supported by the research of Coombes and Anderson (2000). They argued, however, that previous difficult life experiences can, in some instances, “significantly contribute to, rather than detract from, later practice competence” (p. 281).

profession, but certainly I think teachers, parents, social workers. It would work in all professions. You know, I think probably doctors need that sort of stuff too. Particularly the stuff on suicide. It would help their counselling skills, and help them to recognise – and we talked a lot about drug therapy, which is not effective from my own personal knowledge, having seen people go through it. Chemical treatment of depression is a primitive science. It's still a developing field of inquiry.

“With your science background, you’d have more than a passing interest in some of those things. You’d be able to look at it a little more critically than others, perhaps, about how the treatments affect people?” I query, recalling that Patrick commented about this issue during one of the workshop lectures, concerned about medical, pharmaceutical-based, interventions in cases of depressive illness.

*I just know that the brain is a very delicate chemical organism. And drugs and abuse of alcohol and sleepless nights and a bad diet, and all that sort of stuff [affect the brain]. I’ve seen it happen to a couple of people I know. They’ve just not looked after themselves and then wonder why they end up having a mental breakdown. You can’t just, there’s enough pressure in life without putting [extra pressure] on the system. It’s like a computer. It’ll shut down. So, I think doctors need to be... And here he pulls himself up, perhaps not wanting to be seen as overly critical of the medical profession, and finishes by saying, *ah, some are really, really, really good.**

Shortly after, Patrick reveals that one of his relatives is a doctor in Queensland. He’s very much into philosophy and quite a spiritual person, but without being a religious person. And that one of Patrick’s own good friends is a doctor and he’s just a really nice guy, which may, perhaps, explain his reticence to continue his sentence.



Occasionally, over the intervening year since our second interview, Patrick has been asked about his views on the PD by staff members who have since been enrolled in a MESH workshop. *I’ll give them a quick run-down on it. Because a few have said, “Oh, I’m going off to this and what’s it all about? You went, didn’t you?” And it’s normally just passing in the corridor, and you’ve got to stop and, you know, in 30 seconds [explain what MESH is all about], but by and large I can do that okay.*

“So, what do you say in 30 seconds?” Having found this to be a difficult task in the past myself, it interests me to hear how Patrick has been able to articulate what the MESH workshop is “all about.”

Well, it would vary each time, but, I would say, “It is personal development, but it’s done in a really

good way, and, if you look at other self-help type courses that you might read about or do, I'd say it's way better than anything I've come across." It'll help them in their teaching, because it'll help them to appreciate the kids more that they teach. But also it makes you – because we were lucky we went with a group of colleagues – just appreciate that the people you work with, if they're crabby, or you don't particularly like them, they have something going on in their life that you don't know about, and just accept that, and not give it back to them so much, you know, because in a work situation you have got to work as a team. And to be more tolerant. And a bit like Dr Phil,⁷ but you get some good strategies that you can use for yourself and for your class, so yeah.

But by and large they go away quite happy.



"A ball that bounces"

Through listening to the experiences of others in the group sharing sessions, one of the things that Patrick has come to understand more is the shaping force people's past experiences exert on their lives. *Sometimes when you've been doing a job for a long time you do become a little bit, not stagnant, but you just take things for granted too much. When you sit down and talk with adults [during the group experience] you realise a lot of what's going on in their world. Then you come back to a school situation and think about things I might've missed [with students], just those important little cues, like perhaps take them more seriously, yeah.*

As a way of explaining to me what he means by this statement, Patrick shares an experience he had with a student at school in the week following MESH. It's an issue that he took more seriously than he might previously have done, considering the longer-term ramifications of his response due to understandings gained at MESH.

In one class I take, there's one particular boy, Ashley, who can be quite annoying. The problem with him is that he deliberately wants to leave the beginning of the lesson to go to his locker, or do something else, when we're introducing new work, so then he'll come back 5 minutes later and not know what we're doing and he's constantly by my side.

When I came back on Monday, Ashley was in an extension group and I'd sent them all off to get their workbooks and he came up to me and said, "Can I go to see Gordon [the counsellor]?" And I said, "Why? What's going on?" And he said, "Oh, they've all been teasing me. All the kids in the class have been teasing me." Because he does stand out as being a kid who's quite annoying, to the

⁷ Refers to Dr Phil McGraw, an American psychologist, who works with couples and families and their relationships on his television show, *Dr Phil*.

teachers and kids. And I said, "Well, I've talked about this. It's not the right time. You could've gone at recess. We've just had recess. You could've gone then. Sometimes," I said, to use my old line, "you're better off just sitting around and thinking about your problems for a while and then when you go and see Mr Royce, you'll know what to say to him, but can you just wait on because we're about to do this activity and I think you're really going to enjoy it?" And "No, no," he didn't want to do that. He wanted to go and see Gordon. And I said, "Well, you go and see him now, but I don't think he's there. Leave a note and say you'll come back at the end of this period." So, he came back a couple of minutes later, sat down, did the class with me and at the end of the period he went off to see Gordon, but couldn't get him.

I was on duty at lunchtime and Ashley was out on the ball court just out here, he nods towards the window to indicate the asphalt playing courts outside. And a kid ripped his hat off. I was just right next to them and he just took Ashley's hat off and said, "Go away. Go away." But Ashley ran off in tears, and I cornered him when the bell had gone. I said, "What's going on?" And he said, "Oh, they never want to play ball with me. And Anton kept chucking me off the court." And I said, "What's Anton got to do with it?" "Oh, Anton's in charge of the game." I said, "Wait on a minute. No-one's supposed to be in charge of the game. How do you get to be in charge of a game at lunchtime?" "Oh, the kid with their own ball gets to be in charge." And I said, "Well, okay, look, I don't know much about this. Just get yourself a ball." "Oh, I've got a ball." "Well, you mean to say when you're in charge no-one wants to play?" "No, no-one'll play with me when I'm in charge." "Why not, Ashley?" He said, "Oh, because my ball doesn't bounce."

Now, perhaps if I hadn't been to the course I would've gone, he indicates extreme frustration by pretending to pull out his closely-cropped, tight, dark curls. I said, "Look, come with me." And by then [it was the time when] he was [supposed to be] seeing Gordon and I said, "I've got a ball. I'll give you a ball." And knocked on Gordon's door and Ashley was in there with Gordon. I threw him a decent ball. And apparently he got on really well with Gordon. He ceremoniously put his old ball in the bin and I noticed today at lunchtime he was playing ball. Oh, and Gordon did a good thing. He got a student, Anton, in, and Anton had to tell Ashley how he could engage in the game. Anton was one of Ashley's friends. So, coming from Anton, he learnt that you get out first, straight to the court at lunchtime and recess, and then you're in.

And Ashley said, "But I have to get my recess."⁸ And Anton said, "Look, Ashley, just go to the court. Get on the court. If you get out, then go and get your recess." And so, this kid is at risk. He has a number of issues. Perhaps if I hadn't done the course, I would've just said, "No, sit down.

Get on with work."

"But you saw this was something that might make a difference?" I suggest, still thinking it is a very interesting tactic that Gordon has used to bring in Anton, the offender in the incident Patrick has described, to help Ashley develop some meaningful understanding of the "rules of play" on the school's ball courts.

Well, I think he appreciates it that I've taken a bit of time with him. What seems trivial can be, yeah. I'm not saying that's cured the problem. I guarantee tomorrow he'll be in tears again over something else.

"But it might make a little bit of difference to him?" I persist.

Yeah, he's got to learn how to make friends, and if you haven't got a ball that bounces, I mean what hope have you got? It's as simple as that.

I mean you could look at it in detail and say he's looking for a reason why the kids don't want to play with him. It's all attention[-seeking] stuff. He can go off in a tantrum because the kids tease him, but if he really wants to make friends here he has to learn to interact properly with the kids, and not be seen as being uncooperative.

"But just having someone skill him up on the idea of getting out there first," I begin.

Yeah, yeah, and he was playing all lunchtime anyway, so yeah, Patrick finishes.



When I interview Patrick a year later, we recall our discussion of his experience with Ashley and the ball that didn't bounce. Patrick is quick to bring me up-to-speed on his thinking about Ashley's progress.

He doesn't irritate me any more, like he was, like every so often you get a kid who really irritates you. Anyway, I actually said to Gerry the other day, "You know, I think Ashley's grown up a bit this year." I don't teach him, but he doesn't follow me around in the playground, and he's made a few friends. You know, he has grown up, and I'm quite amazed at that, yeah.

"You didn't think it was gonna happen that soon?"

Not that soon. I'm sure he's still got some problems, but he was an exceptional case.

"Maybe he's putting some things in place that you started?" I suggest.

⁸ The term "recess" refers both to the short morning break between lessons, and, in this case, the food snack and drink that students usually have during this break.

Yeah, I think bit by bit he's started to figure out again that the problems he was blaming everyone else for, he could solve a lot of the problems if he wanted to. Some kids create the problems so they can feel bad about themselves, or get the attention, or whatever it is, and that's a fairly destructive thing, and there'll come a time where they just think, "Do I keep going like this, or do I actually do something about it?"



"I think this course is really about parenting"

Patrick has a daughter, Kelsey, aged 17, and a son, Edward, 14. Eleven years ago, seemingly without much warning, his wife left the family and since then he's looked after his children fifty per cent of the time. He finds being a single parent quite a difficult task, especially as he's been *working full-time, and also trying to do other things outside [of work]*. *I wouldn't say I didn't enjoy it, it's just that when you're shopping and cooking and cleaning, it's constant, and then full-time work. It's pretty hard. But I enjoy it. I don't like being bored. And I don't mind being a single parent. I probably have more empathy now with the single parents [of kids at school]*.

Kids are a big part of your life and, I'm sure that even if you didn't have kids it [MESH] would help you in a teaching situation, but certainly as a parent it was interesting hearing other people's stories, too. Amongst your friends you might have a brief conversation, but you don't often as adults, with total strangers, talk about issues that you've had with your own children.

Patrick compares the difficulty he has relating to his daughter with what he believes to be his better understanding of adolescent boys. *Girls are different. I don't understand how to deal with them, but boys are fairly straightforward. Girls are very much moody, whereas boys are fairly [straightforward]*.

"What about connections between MESH and you parenting your children? Is there anything that you got out of it as far as being a parent?" I query Patrick.

Oh, well, for me, yeah, definitely. That was a big part of it.

Kelsey was at my house Monday night, and she was all teary and everything, and I said, "What's wrong?" I thought I was getting over the hurdle, but Monday night she told me she had to have three major written works for submission today, right.

"Oh, what's the problem?" you know, "We talked about them." She hadn't done anything virtually. She had bits of paper all over the table. She'd half written one and I was going to say,

‘Look, well you’ve put this stress on yourself,’ you know and she was coming up with ‘Oh, I don’t need English anyway,’ which she does, and she’s still got no idea about planning. So anyway, I believe she’s handing the stuff in, then she rang me this morning and I had to e-mail one of her assignments to school because she had to edit that up, and these are the things she should’ve been working on all year.

Speaking from my own experience as a parent of teenage girls who have done similar things in the past, I sympathise with Patrick’s dilemma. “Oh, it’s awful, isn’t it, when they do that?”

And, what do you do, you know, like, the whole thing you’re trying to get through to your kids is that you want them to do their best and the way to do your best is to be a little bit organised and plan.

“And here you are pulling your hair out with them, trying to get them to do it.” I understand Patrick’s frustration only too well.

Yeah, you can’t spoon feed them, and, because she lives in two houses it’s not as if I can ring [her] Mum and say, because [her] Mum is a teacher too, and say, ‘Did you realise she hasn’t done anything?’

“She probably doesn’t realise either, just as you didn’t realise,” I support this other mother, unknown to me except through Patrick’s stories.

Well, apparently [her] Mum was up late last night editing, you know.

“I’ve been there and done that,” I recall. I remember only too well the last minute, late night rushes that my own daughters’ inattention to homework assignments had caused over a period of years. They, too, have lacked time management skills.

But if I’d rung [her] Mum and said [about the assignment not having been completed], [her] Mum would say ‘Well, it’s your fault. You should’ve known. She’s been with you all weekend.’ But it’s not something [helpful], all it would do is cause friction, so I can’t even ring [her] Mum and say ‘Did you realise?’ because then the friction would be taken out on my daughter, because [her] Mum would go, ‘Well, you didn’t tell me, and [your] Dad rang me and told me you haven’t done this.’ So, I had to let it go and hope that she did something. But parenting’s a big one. Like I said there aren’t too many courses on parenting. I think this course is really about parenting.



A year later, I bring up the subject of Patrick’s family again, wanting to know if there

have been long-term benefits to his relationship with Kelsey. “You said it’s hard bringing up a daughter, and talked a bit about issues with her. Do you believe that anything you covered at MESH has been useful in dealing with those issues?”

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Very much so, yeah.

“Can you describe how you find it useful?” I follow up my “yes”/“no” question in the hope of getting a more illustrative answer.

Ab, my daughter’s going through a REALLY difficult time, in recent weeks, and it’s taken all my counselling skills and also it’s taken a huge [effort to] bite my tongue and just not have any resentment to my ex-wife and we’ve actually become very much united in recent weeks over her, because it is such a serious issue. So yeah, it’s taken all my counselling skills, and also my ability to get over previous things that might’ve worried me, and realise there are more important things, so, yeah, I’d say that [what I learnt at MESH] is a big part of it. Again, it’s not something I consciously think about.

I would say [though] that [what I learnt at MESH] was an important part of my development, because it’s [been] an INCREDIBLY difficult time to cope with, yeah. So, yeah, that would definitely be part of [the impact on] my home life, yeah.

“Mm, well it’s good that you and your wife are united in your efforts.”

Ye-ab, that’s part of, hopefully, the solution, but it won’t be the whole thing.

“No, but it’s good for your kids to see that, I guess.”

Yep. Oh, it’s very important for the kids to see that parents are united, particularly if they’re not living together. That’s another problem that a lot of kids face in our world is that, kids are growing up more and more in separated families, and the effect on them is hard to really measure until much later in life. I think if parents still get on well, the harm can be totally minimised.

“Mm, can reduce that effect.”

Reduces the effect, it may not get rid of it, but again it’s an individual thing, you know, some kids still respond badly, but my experience here [at Clovelly] is that, of the kids I’ve taught that have been through separations, some have been, remained terrific kids, and [parental separation has] had no effect because both parents get on. But where there’s a bit of um, Patrick slaps his hands together to indicate head-on confrontation between parents, yep!



“You couldn’t NOT get something out of it for yourself”

“Did you find MESH personally enriching or challenging?” I ask towards the end of my final interview with Patrick.

Abhh, yeah. For sure, yep.

We both laugh at Patrick’s obvious avoidance tactics, fuelled by another “yes”/“no” question taken literally. Then he adds, *Pass!* just as he would have in a MESH group if he hadn’t wished to contribute to the conversation.

“Pass? Okay,” I say, not wanting to push him on this issue if he doesn’t want to volunteer information. But he decides to continue despite my allowance of his “right to pass.”

Yeah, no, it was definitely, you know, it certainly was personal development as well, as well as professional development. Yeah, I would say so, for sure. His hesitance causes me to believe that Patrick is a little uncomfortable with this line of questioning.

I settle back into my chair and tell him about the questionnaire I sent out to past participants earlier in my study, and how only two of the fifty-six respondents considered the workshop to be purely professional development. The overwhelming majority had believed it was both personal as well as professional development.

Yeah. You’d have to say personal and professional. No. You couldn’t NOT get something out of it for yourself. You know, unless you’re a totally together human being that has no need for personal development whatsoever because you’ve reached the pinnacle. I think you’d have to get some personal development out of it. Yeah, couldn’t fail to.

Patrick manages to get across the point that he believes that there is the potential for most people to benefit from participation in a MESH workshop, but avoids being any more specific about what he’s gained personally from his participation.

Perhaps I could have pushed harder for an answer to my original question, but from my observations over the course of our three interviews and the 3-day workshop, it is my understanding that Patrick doesn’t like to disclose too much about his personal life. That’s his prerogative, and I respect that.

Chapter 9

Vivienne Deane

*“I’m a fairly goal-orientated,
purposeful sort of practitioner”*

Vivienne Deane, at our final interview, is in a very different “place,” than when I first met her. I feel she is looking and feeling more relaxed for having moved to her new school. Meadowbank Primary, is a seemingly-quiet little school, servicing a small rural community on the outskirts of the city. Vivienne takes great pride in showing me around the school where she has been Acting Principal for the previous two terms.¹ With an enrolment of less than 70 students, there are only four classes.

It seems to me that the contrast between her new position and her previous one is stark. When I first met her, Vivienne had been Acting Assistant Principal for four terms at Cherryvale Primary School, a large and busy school where she had worked for 4 years. At Cherryvale, she had worn *the hat of the person for kids who are included² or kids that are on alternative programs throughout the school*, as well as having been responsible for children from kindergarten to Grade 2. For over 2 years, she regularly dealt very closely with families in crisis; *people who have experienced traumatic experiences. Teachers refer people who are in the “too hard basket” to me because I’m wearing that hat. So, I’m really the contact person within the school for issues to do with welfare. I regularly deal with situations and then afterwards I think, “Ooh, I wonder if I could’ve done that in a different way?”*

The responsibility Vivienne had felt to the school, the education department and, particularly, the students and families with whom she came into contact had caused her to consider undertaking *a counselling-type course or something along those lines*. She had

¹ Tasmanian school years consist of three terms, with each school year commencing in February.

² Those students attending “regular” schools under an inclusive education policy. “The concept of inclusion is based on the notion that schools should, without question, provide for the needs of all the children in their communities, whatever the level of their ability or disability” (Foreman, 2001, p. 459).

considered enrolling in a course through *Adult Ed*³ and looked at different options, not seriously, but just fleeting thoughts. [The MESH flyer had] outlined issues that appealed; things that I thought I needed to cover. It wasn't that Cherryvale was any more challenging than other schools she'd worked in over the past 20-odd years, but just that, because I'm in the role that I'm in now, I'm dealing on a nearly daily basis with issues that are very complex, and feel that at this point in time that that's my area that I need to hone up on or get confirmation on what I am doing and saying.

We do have a social worker and a guidance officer, and I'm the liaison person for those people, and so referrals come from families or from teachers, or from other agencies to me and then I refer them to the guidance officer or social worker and then they come back and so I'm really the lynch-pin in that whole area for the school, and quite often I refer people on, but I still am the one that's dealing with the child or the family on a fairly day-to-day basis.

Vivienne certainly believe[s] in working with whole families and in building relationships. I probably connect mainly with kids that ARE different, and who don't normally connect with others. I have high but realistic expectations of all the kids. I work really hard and am very passionate about everyone succeeding. She describes herself as being obviously very approachable because even when I refer people to somebody else they keep coming back. Perhaps these people considered her, too, as she does herself, to be a really good listener.

Vivienne never received any formal training or professional development to help her cope with helping parents and students at Cherryvale. She found that the demands of her busy workload often weighed heavily on her mind, causing her some anxiety. One of the problems is that it's just really hard, really, really challenging time-wise, and sometimes I feel that I haven't given enough time to somebody who probably needed more time just because of the nature of my work. Afterwards I think, "Oh, it would've been much better if I'd said this," and whatever, and so I often worry about what I have or haven't said when I'm rushing along.

Such was her dedication to her role that she had considered that having 3 days away from the school to attend the PD would be quite difficult. I actually would've preferred it to be even a Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or a Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Just because it's hard in schools; it's really hard in schools [to take leave]. Vivienne was particularly concerned about those students who might need her assistance on the days when she wasn't able to be there for them. It seemed that, daily, she was faced with the problem that *if this little*

³ Adult Education is an education program run by TAFE (Technical and Further Education) Tasmania.

person wants someone there and then, then she wants someone there and then. It was this overwhelming responsibility to the students in her care that Vivienne found hard to let go.

In her role at Cherryvale, Vivienne was a key contact for several families; some in which serious childhood or parental illness was an issue, and others where a child had been placed in care situations because of abusive or violent family circumstances. And while, within the Cherryvale school community, there's *a big pocket of poverty*, and *poverty affects a large group*, the cases that are the most challenging are cases where it's not just poverty but it's also situations with family break-up or, we had a mum pass away at the beginning of the year who had three little people here. And supporting the class-mates and the children [through that was part of my role].

Last year we had a teacher whose son was killed, and the sort of expectation is that people in senior roles, like I've got, are able to provide the support necessary in these huge different areas, so many different areas. Sometimes I get into conversations and I'm thinking, "Hooley-Dooley! I don't know how to respond here."



"I've had a lot of roles ... in my teaching career"

Vivienne was very young when she left school after a year of Matric.⁴ She attended teachers' college for 4 years, and then went straight to teaching. Originally, I wanted to do Speech Therapy. I don't know why. I think that's what I wanted to do to start off with, and then I got accepted into nursing, and I got a [Department of Education] scholarship in the same year, and I didn't want to do nursing. I was really forced out of home – my parents had moved away and so I couldn't live at home anyway for my second year at Matric – so when I got a studentship, well I just did it. I probably rushed a decision, but no, I was pretty keen.

Although Vivienne's welfare liaison role at Cherryvale filled the majority of her time, she had trained as a Reading Recovery⁵ teacher and still taught within the school for 1 hour and 40 minutes every day. I take two students for Reading Recovery every day, so that's an

⁴ Old equivalent to Grade 11 and 12.

⁵ Reading Recovery is promoted as being an "effective early literacy intervention designed to significantly reduce the number of children with literacy difficulties in schools. Reading Recovery provides daily one to one teaching with a specially trained teacher for children making the slowest progress in literacy learning after a year at school" (Reading Recovery New Zealand, n.d.). The program was developed in New Zealand by Dame Marie Clay.

hour every day, and I'm a Flying Start⁶ teacher. So, I'm in a prep class 40 minutes every day. I haven't had my own class for 6 years. I do get to trial things; I go into lots of classes and trial lots of things, but it's not the same. If I go to a PD thing or whatever, I think "Ooh! Better go and try this!" So I actually take a lot of classes from K-6, but prefer the younger kids, I think. Vivienne's preference may reflect her teaching background as an early childhood teacher.

When I ask her about what she likes about her role, she thinks for a moment before answering. *I think I like the variety. It's really challenging; the pace is very challenging and sometimes at the end of the day some of the teachers say, "My goodness, you've earned your pay today." But being able to look back on changes is really exciting. I really enjoy working with families, with parents, and have done that for a long time, in different roles that I've had, 'cos I've had a lot of roles, in the Education Department, in my teaching career.*

"What roles have you had?" I accept what appears to me to be an invitation from Vivienne to find out more about her career biography. In doing so, I discover that not only has Vivienne had experience in a number of roles, she has also gained several qualifications during her teaching career. Achievement seems to be very important to who she is as a teacher, and as a person.

I've worked at Early Special Ed. I've been a literacy consultant, so I've worked across schools. I've been a support teacher, and so I've actually gone in and supported kids with special needs in regular schools. I've actually worked in a segregated setting; I've worked at Camleydale with a group of young children who, for one reason or another, couldn't be accommodated for when the districts first came into play, and then [as an] AST2⁷ with different roles. Oh, and here I've been the Project Officer for Curriculum Consultation but I've also had a cluster role in that as well, in supporting all the schools in the cluster for the last couple of years.

"So your career has been really varied then," I comment, reflecting on the range of positions evident from Vivienne's inventory.

Oh, it's been really varied, and that's been really good.

"So you don't get bored with the same thing year-in, year-out; it's new challenges all the time?"

Oh, just different challenges, and moving on, and I've certainly developed a repertoire of skills, but this year, and term three last year, it became obvious that professionally what I really wanted to do

⁶ Flying Start is "a staffing allocation made to schools to support literacy teaching and learning in Years K to 2" (Department of Education, 2005).

⁷ Advanced Skills Teacher level 2.

was some sort of counselling-type course and that's really where I'm at.

"That's why you're looking at MESH?" I assume.

Yeah, I mean I was considering doing a fully-fledged [diploma or degree course], going to uni, but I just finished my [Coursework] Masters last year, so I didn't want to do that.

"You're a bit uni-ed out at the moment?" I laugh, as I query Vivienne. She rolls her eyes, indicating that she's had enough of formal study for the time being.

Vivienne's Masters degree course had been *mainly in [the areas of] leadership and change implementation*, which she'd enjoyed and found to be relevant to her work. *But it's good it's over; it's nice to be over. Nice to be finished. But, no, I did enjoy it. I wouldn't do it if I didn't.* In order to complete this particular qualification, Vivienne had attended *summer school and spring school over 2 years* while she was still *working full-time*. *And prior to that I did my pre-principal accreditation. That was pretty big too, but that didn't count, at all.*

"So you don't get any recognition or pay increase or ...?" I'm not quite sure what she means, exactly, by "count."

No, except then it was suggested to me that I actually shouldn't have done that, I should've done a Graduate Certificate in Leadership, and so I did that the following year, and that wasn't quite as hard, because I could actually use a lot of what I'd done anyway.

"Yes. And that's actually counted for something?" I ask, still trying to tease out her meaning of "count."

And that counted, yeah. And then I did the other courses. I mean if I'd done it purely for promotion I probably would've done something a bit easier. I would've done something in literacy which has been a strength, and I could've done lots of things in literacy without doing nearly as much learning and work.

"But you've enjoyed it obviously," I can tell from what Vivienne has said, and from her expression, that she has found her studies to be worthwhile. And I now understand that "count" means that the qualification will be taken into consideration if seeking promotion within the Department of Education.⁸

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it's been really good in my Essential Learnings⁹ role. Yeah.

⁸ Further study "counts" towards promotion in other Australian states (Vivienne Deane, personal communication, December 28, 2007).

⁹ The Essential Learnings curriculum began a rolling introduction into schools in 2000. After the state election in 2006, they were quickly replaced by the new Tasmanian Curriculum.

“So are you going to do any more study in the future, do you think?” I ask, wondering if Vivienne will feel a need to pursue further qualifications.

No, I’ll do these 3 days and then see if it fills the hole that I want it to fill. I’ve even thought about phoning Lifeline, who do the counselling on the telephone, ’cos I was thinking of that, but I can’t do that because I’m not available to do the actual follow-up work. [Anyway,] I don’t need people to phone me with issues ’cos I’ve got them coming in the door!

I saw this [MESH flyer] and then I stopped looking.



“I’m hoping that I’ll have a greater understanding”

Vivienne has several outcomes she is keen to achieve by attending the MESH workshop. *I’m hoping that I’ll have a greater understanding about the issues involved in all of those things on the program [flyer]; being more informed about what the implications are of substance abuse; being able to learn more about how to deal with grief and loss will improve my interactions with students and parents and teachers back here in the workforce, back here at ho-, at school.*

“Grief and loss because you’ve had that couple of incidents that you talked about within the school community?” I query.

Yeah, yeah, but I think it’s more the dysfunctional families – that in particular.

“You see a few of those?”

Oh, lots! Mm, mm. And again, kids who have just been through lots of trauma, and by Thursday and Friday they’re fine here, but by Monday, they’ve just had so many experiences over the weekend that you just wouldn’t like to put your head in the door. They’ve come back to school, and it all comes out.

When there are problems at school, or issues at school, sometimes you DO need to contact the parents about it obviously before it gets right out of hand at school, but sometimes you wonder whether it makes things worse. When kids have done the wrong thing here, and you phone up [a parent], you have to be very careful that, “Just informing you that...,” “Oh! I’ll kill the bastard!” And we’re, “No, no, no, no, no! They actually made a good choice in the end.” Oh! So, it’s really hard.

Vivienne is aware, also, that for some families alcohol and other drug addictions are an influencing factor in their lives and behaviour. *We’ve had, I think, probably, two, three incidents where a very intoxicated parent came to take their child [home from school]. That’s dealing*

with it directly, but you hear about it from the kids.

◆◆◆ MESH experience ◆◆◆

A week after the workshop, Vivienne recalls feeling that *the pace of it was really difficult, just the intensity, and I wasn't well, so I was probably a bit thick between the ears.* I laugh aloud at her suggestion. *I was! I knew it was so important and sometimes I found it really hard to concentrate, whereas normally I'm pretty good at that sort of thing. So that was hard.*

And obviously sometimes knowing whether to disclose or not disclose, sometimes knowing whether to contribute, or not, and when I knew that I had to have that story on the last day, I just laboured over it at home for ages and ages and ages, you know, that was really, really hard, and for a while I was thinking, "Well, I could really work on the no voice thing." I was nearly gonna opt out! Vivienne laughs. *I thought, you know, "They could all hear that I had voice trouble and I could just pretend that it was still really bad."*

When I realised that my voice wasn't really that bad, I thought, "Oh, damn! That'd be right."

Having nominated as one of the co-facilitators for one of the group sessions on the third day, a Friday, Vivienne had faced a dilemma. She knew from the briefing I had given the day before that, as part of her training to become a support group facilitator, she was expected to share "a personal example of a challenging situation" in order to set the tone for self-disclosure by other group members. When she'd thought about stories she could share, she'd *had some options* but wasn't sure of the depth she should go to, wondering to herself, *"As the facilitator do I go this far, [or] this far?"* She'd thought of one particularly challenging experience that she could share, *and then thought, "Well, I can't go that far, but what I could do is talk to my husband further, and then I could go this far."* And so that's what I did really, but even that was really hard to do.

However, finding a moment alone with her husband wasn't going to be easy. It was Thursday evening, and *Thursdays are disastrous* in Vivienne's household – *Unity¹⁰ and band. Lauren has band straight after school, and then she has volleyball, and Leigh has Unity and then he has band. Thursdays are shocking days; Thursdays are the only day we don't actually have a meal together.* Vivienne felt so anxious that she had to distract herself. *I just had to clean up the courtyard, 'cos I didn't want to go inside and do schoolwork while I waited for my husband to come home. I just had to wait.*

Vivienne's husband had been to collect Lauren from the other side of town and the

¹⁰ A church-run youth group.

father and daughter had eaten a meal out somewhere. *I had Leigh and then I did the 7:30 drop-off and the 8:00 pick up. So, it was about 8:30. Thursdays are like that. But I was wanting to talk, and I was really stewing over [things], you know, so that was hard.*

The compulsion to share her story with the group was strong. Vivienne wanted her contribution to the group to be something that was meaningful; however her loyalty to her husband almost demanded that she take the opportunity to share her story with him first. *I probably thought that sometimes in the group situation, even though it was good for me to share things, sometimes it made me think, "Well, wouldn't it be more appropriate, instead of having to share with this support group, because I finally feel safe, wouldn't it be more appropriate to deal with the issue myself?" So, I did that.*

Vivienne had been the victim of sexual abuse earlier in her life. It was something that she had previously only *touched* on in discussions with her husband; *I'd mentioned it in passing, and that's what Naomi said too. She mentioned it in passing.* Naomi,¹¹ who had been in the same MESH workshop as Vivienne, had shared with the group how she had told her first husband of her own sexual assault, and had found that "he didn't want to know about it."¹² Sadly, because of this initial negative experience, Naomi had never felt it appropriate to talk with her second husband, Peter, about the incident.

Vivienne believes that, within her own marriage, *the whole communication between my husband and I, and our whole relationship, HAS been compromised, had been compromised because of this [sexual abuse]. I still sometimes think, "Oh, just let it lie now." I don't think it affected anyone else, and I don't think it was ever going to affect us totally, because I can just hide, just put it aside. But, it does play on my mind often, you know.*

"So how do you feel now about having told your husband about your experience?" I wonder whether Vivienne's experience of sharing her story has been different from Naomi's.

Oh, that's good. I think it's good. I mean we probably won't go back to it. But, at least he knows now, a bit more, far more than he did before, you know?

"And was he supportive?"

Mm. Mm, he didn't want, didn't draw, want, you know, he didn't want to say. He gave me as much time, he gave me, you know, like 10 minutes. Vivienne laughs self-consciously. *But,*

¹¹ See Naomi Cameron's narrative account (p. 179).

¹² Second interview with Naomi Cameron, November 3, 2004.

um, he's not gonna go back [over it]. He won't ever do. He's a fairly private sort of person, too.



One year on, Vivienne's memory of her training is that, I was sick. I couldn't talk. No, wipe that! I sort of dragged myself along, even when I was really sick, 'cos I didn't want to miss it. I really wanted to be there, and I had been looking forward to it, and being part of it.

I probably learnt that you can't, sometimes you don't keep secrets forever. That's probably it. I mean, I think I've always known a lot about ME, and about myself, it's just that I don't let many other people know that, so, you know, sometimes probably you [need to] let [down] a few defences – that's not always bad.

“So, what did you see as your defences?”

Oh, I just block things out. And I've got this, everybody knows, everybody sees the person that I present, and I just do it so well. She laughs at how she's able to hide behind her “mask.” Yeah, so, it's just a façade of presenting a different person, a different face, really, yeah.

I suppose it was just a bit more of a letting go type feeling, and I suppose also hearing other people's stories, [I] realised that maybe my stories weren't as unique, you know, that there are some other people that have possibly had similar experiences, whereas I probably thought I was always on my own, with my story, so, yeah, I've sort of probably made some connections.

I still think that I will always be WAY more insular, or secretive or protective or something than most people. I hardly ever let people see that I've got problems! she laughs.

I mean people come in here and, you know, spend a really long time, [talking to me]. You know, and I just go, “Mm.”

“Do you ever have someone that listens to you, or if you wanted to talk about an issue would you have someone to listen to you?”

Um, I think so. I don't know. I don't know! That's a really hard question! I dunno! I don't know.

“No?”

No, I suppose I talk to t-, and really it's all, [sigh], b-, I mean, it's all work stuff, I just, you know, and that's what I think about.

“You think about work?”

Mm, mm. Yeah, that's when I go to colleagues. There's people in my professional area that I go and talk to.

“But in your personal life?”

No. Not at all. I don't think so at all. I haven't found someone yet.



Probably some of the stories still spring to mind. I can't remember a lot of the stories as such; I can just remember aspects of them. I think it's really good to hear other people, the hearing of other people's stories is really important, because other people's stories do help with your own stories.

It was more probably I can remember some of the skills. I think it was probably the techniques of listening to the stories be[ing] told as much as the actual stories themselves, I think. And then I suppose that's me trying to be the “counsellor.” My role is trying to help other people in going from there.

I think you can hear a story and then have different avenues for reacting or reflecting [on it]. And I think that storying, offering lots of ways of responding to the storying is really important. And I think it's after the storying that the importance is, yeah, not [to] just leave it at the storying. [In the group, there were] the connections. But I think still it was after that when you just had a chat to, or went back to the person, or you know, a long time later reflected on it.



“You can see the potential for a group”

Vivienne believes that the PD *was good. It was really good. I got really excited.* On her return to the school after the PD, she had *e-mailed off to the principal, for immediate “what we're going to do” type things. I know that for myself, if I don't do something now, I'll lose what I've got in my brain about it and it will be harder to start something next year. I'm a person that if I go to PD I need to do something straight away, and I also need to do it really well.*

Vivienne asks if I'd like to hear about her plans for implementing what she's learned from the PD within the school. Naturally, I am keen for her to give me an overview.

I talked at [our] staff meeting about setting up a support group, and people were very interested. I gave a bit of a history of the group, and I said that “You actually experience a support group with adults [as part of the PD]. You can't put into words what that means, but once you've actually experienced it you can see the potential for a group.” She had explained to the staff the confidential nature of disclosures by group participants. *There were a few questions about kids disclosing stuff, and how far do you take confidentiality, and so I talked a little bit about that. Mind you, in the back of my mind, [I still believe that] there are still some issues about that.*

It's my experience, and I believe it's very understandable, that, among MESH workshop participants, particularly those working within a school context, concerns over issues to do with the confidentiality pledge¹³ are widely held. A partial explanation for this concern is the fact that, in Tasmania, teachers are identified as "prescribed persons" in *The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997*, and, as such, are mandatory reporters of suspected child abuse.¹⁴ Another explanation is that, as professionals working in one of the "caring professions," teachers are obviously concerned for the welfare of their students and do not wish to compromise or endanger children in any way. Ironically, however, some teachers feel uncomfortable with the prospect of being in such a position at all, feeling that this is at odds with their primary role; teaching.

Despite Vivienne's lingering concerns, she could see the value of running support groups for students, and had told her colleagues that she was preparing to trial a group catering for students from Grades 2 to 4. She asked the staff to consider whom amongst the students in their classes they believed might potentially benefit from attending such a group.

Vivienne, who expressed the view that she was *nervous about implementing* what she had learned at the workshop, had already sought the assistance of the school's social worker to act as her co-facilitator. She didn't believe that running the group with a teacher *who hasn't been through this [MESH] process* would be a good idea. *They'll want me to have all the answers. Because I'm up on a pedestal*, she smiles. She thought, too, that some of the teachers might have trouble with maintaining confidentiality or, perhaps, be

¹³ Workshop participants are advised during their own support group experience (when the group purposes and guidelines are read at the beginning of each group session) that if they choose to disclose any information pertaining to child abuse or imminent harm to self or others, that the facilitator(s) cannot keep this information confidential. Participants are advised that if they choose to disclose anything of this nature that appropriate professional assistance will be sought for them. This models the appropriate process for facilitating a school support group.

Children are similarly advised, at the beginning of each group session, that, should they choose to disclose child abuse or imminent harm to self or others, those issues cannot be kept confidential, and, in such an event, the child making the disclosure will be able to go with the group facilitator to report the issue to an appropriate person.

However, if a group facilitator suspects that a disclosure of this nature is imminent, they are advised to caution the child that the facilitator suspects that she/he is about to hear something that needs to be taken further, and the child is asked if this is the case and whether she/he wishes to disclose at all – and if so, in group, or in private, or with a social worker. In either case, the child is then aware that she/he is making a conscious decision to report an incident and, by so doing, seek professional help.

¹⁴ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007b). Similar legislation affects teachers in most other Australian states.

tempted to try to “fix” student problems,¹⁵ instead of simply providing students with a safe setting in which they could share their feelings, thoughts and concerns.

She would have liked the opportunity to get together with others she had grouped with to discuss issues involved in setting up a group. *I’m now feeling really alone, in doing this. I’m thinking, “Jeez, I’ve gotta do this, and look at who I’m gonna try and do it with, and where’s my manual, and what am I gonna do?” and I’m thinking, “Argh! What am I gonna do next Thursday. Next Thursday!” So, I’m thinking, “Ohhh!”*

Next Thursday [as well as beginning the support group in the school], in the morning I’ve got Reading Recovery and I’m actually teaching a child, who has autism, behind a screen while 15 other teachers watch, and I just planned that yesterday with the parent. So, yeah, I mean my every day is HUGE, really huge. And tonight I’m working with the [Grade] 1/2 teachers after school, trying to get the Grade 2s going into Grade 3 class [organised]. So, I’ve got 20 minutes this afternoon, when I’m not teaching, to get planned. So, yeah, I work very hard.

When I spoke with her, there were only 6 weeks remaining before the end of the school year, and Vivienne was aware that, if she was to trial a support group at all, she *wanted to do it right. Why do I do it?* She laughs at her compulsion to take on the extra work that running a group will entail at this difficult time of year, when there are numerous administrative tasks that require her urgent attention.

And I think that, I mean even though I believe these kids will benefit from it, that the purpose really is for me. I’m really doing it [now] because I’ll do a better job next year with facilitating a support group if I have a go [this year, first]. Plus, I’m doing it because I need other teachers to see [the potential]. And it’s not the best time of the year to do that, either, she laughs, aware that she is possibly setting up herself, and the support group, to fail. Her inclusion of the social worker in her plans is to *make it a bit easier.*



A year later, Vivienne is quick to point out that one of the best things about her MESH participation is that it has given her *a tool to actually run the support groups.*

“Last time we talked, you felt quite anxious about starting a support group. You only had 6 weeks left before the end of the year. But you did actually run a group?” I ask.

Yeah, we did. It went really well. I ran the group with the social worker, and that was really good.

¹⁵ In support groups, everyone has the right to pass, there are no probing or “why” questions, there is no advice given, no analysing of issues and no “fixing.” This is not the case with therapy groups.

She was the right person at the time. And there were some students in that group, who I didn't know very well before, and afterwards, this year, have had a real bond with me – some of the older girls who probably really needed that. Yeah, yeah. I was going to run it again this year, and actually had my groups and everything all sorted and everything and then I was here [at Meadowbank]! Not down there [at Cherryvale]. So, it didn't actually happen again, which is really unfortunate. But certainly from a staff point of view they were very keen for it to happen again, and it was going to happen. And I had a class teacher all lined up who was going to do the group with me. I even had letters written, the children identified and everything. But I came here the day before the first session.

While Vivienne believed that setting up the support group and actually getting it going was good, the beginning of the year had been a busy time. The principal had been away, and she was acting principal at Cherryvale for the first 6 weeks of this year, and during that time there was no way that any support group could get up and going, 'cos it just couldn't happen. And then, after that, the principal was still not back; he was doing another role, so it was probably not until after Easter that we could get back into something that was a bit like normality, but it still wasn't, because he was still out of the school a lot. I was the only person that had been in the school for a while, so it was all the beginning of the year type stuff – the orientation to new staff, and new families, and just all the changes, all the departmental changes – meant that you just kept on running really. Mm.

Vivienne says that she got really positive feedback during the 6-week trial from the [students' classroom] teachers about the students in the group she had run. And from the social worker, but she was part of it. And from the kids, and 'specially from a Grade 4 girl, who's a very big, obese [girl, with] low self-esteem, who never sees [her] Mum. I didn't know her before, but it made a huge impact on her. She was one who the social worker put in [our group], but I hadn't worked with [her] before and didn't know her.

“You hadn't realised that there was an issue that needed...?”

Not so much, no, 'cos most of my time was taken up with kids whose behaviour was challenging, whereas Kathryn was just a poor, little... But she was REALLY good.

Although there wasn't any disclosing [of] big confidences within the group that Vivienne had established, she'd noticed that there were some connections that were really, really good, and depth of conversations on an individual basis were really, really good.

Something else she discovered was that they really loved the secret names,¹⁶ and I was

¹⁶ Vivienne is referring to an activity in the first group session; an introductory name (memory) game, during which each participant chooses a positive descriptor to match the initial sound of their name.

Delightful Deane, and I was Delightful Deane for them for a long time afterwards. They loved that. They loved that. Absolutely loved that, and so we had Tumbling Tyrone and Cute Kathryn and whatever. And there wasn't one put-down. Everyone was positive about the names from the word "go," all the way through. That was really, really positive, and that connection was kept going all the way through, and later, so that was really lasting.

Sometimes we try and keep these kids [who are experiencing difficulties] separate from each other, because they clash terribly, but I think it would also be quite good to get the kids to talk about their stories so that they can see that not only have they got commonality in that they can flare up and fight, but they've also got some other things in common that they don't really, usually, talk about.

From her own MESH support group experience, and the one she'd run at the school, Vivienne is realising *the importance of having the opportunity for people to talk about themselves*. She is even using an activity from the initial group session¹⁷ *as a way in, to get to know kids. So that's worked. That's been something that I've thought was a really good avenue to become part of the actual getting to know people [process].*

Vivienne laments the fact that her plans for further groups – one for *a younger group, and then I wanted to target an older group* – at Cherryvale came to nothing. The class teacher she had asked to co-facilitate the groups was keen to have done so, and had a student teacher on internship in her classroom and so would have had the time to assist. However, the planned support groups couldn't run without someone who was trained to run them, and after Vivienne moved to Meadowbank there was no-one else in the school who has received the appropriate training.



"Hadr't thought of what I would gain personally. Not at all"

Vivienne is married to a high school teacher and they have two children. When I first met Vivienne, her son, Leigh, was in Grade 9 at Patterson High and *going to turn 15 in 13 days he tells me*. Lauren, her 11-year old daughter, was in Grade 6 at Rivervista Primary School.

¹⁷ This activity produces something akin to the "annals" described by Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112). Participants fold an A4 page into quarters, then unfold it and use each of the eight sections (front and back) as spaces to record significant events experienced during life. The eight sections are used as time-frames, which vary according to the age of participants. The items listed then act as memory prompts in a one-to-one sharing of life history, where the person telling the life decides which events they wish to share, while their partner listens without giving feedback.

Vivienne obviously held some concerns for her children, but especially for her son.

I don't know where he gets it from, but he's decided that he's going to be a regular church-goer and youth group person. He's very musical, and absolutely can't stand anyone smoking or drinking or swearing, she laughs.

Guessing from the way she's laughed about her son's life choices, I suggest that, "He doesn't get this ideology from his mother, I take it?"

No! I mean he works for Unity on a voluntary basis and does all those sort of things, so I'm quite sure that a lot of the things that affect some teenagers in making good choices, they're not going to be issues for him. I don't think he'll be swayed; don't think he'd experiment with any drugs or anything like that. Not at all. Grief he finds, I suppose that has been a bit of an issue with him. He finds it very, very difficult to deal with grief.

"He's had to deal with grief?"

Yeah, lots. Yeah, he's been to far more funerals than he has weddings. Again, she laughs hesitantly. I had three grandparents who still were alive when he was young, and so he had three funerals when he was probably 8, 9 and 10, then his grandmother [died] when he was about 12, so [he's dealt with a number of deaths in] a very short period of time. And then one of his favourite teachers [died] last year. He's a very sensitive guy and will write things down. He actually made up a poem about his grandmother and read it out at the church service.

"Oh, goodness!" I exclaim, knowing how difficult I would find this to do, even as an adult.

And he's a very strong, but sensitive, little fellow. Big fellow. But yeah, grief. Probably helping him deal with grief.

"So, that's something that you might be able to get out of it, personally?"

Yeah, but I hadn't even thought about that, though. Hadn't thought of what I would gain personally. Not at all. Either Vivienne perceives the workshop as potentially and solely benefiting her professional life, or perhaps she feels that it may seem wrong to gain personal benefit from a professional experience that is paid for by the school and carried out during school time. And Lauren, oh! Her father keeps saying, "We'll get a shotgun when she turns into a teenager," she laughs. She's a pretty flirtatious little 11-year-old.

"Mm. So they're quite different, then?" I remark.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Very different.

◆◆◆ MESH experience ◆◆◆

During the interview that follows the 3-day workshop, I ask Vivienne if she has learned anything about other people in general that she can attribute to her participation. She immediately thinks of how her perceptions of her relationship with her son, Leigh, have altered.

I probably learnt a lot about my son. Because I could see how my interaction with him wasn't as healthy as it could be. I think that I can see him making some big mistakes that I made as a child and I always worried that he's going – he's so popular with so many people and he tries to be involved in everything and can't say "No" to anyone, about anything, and I think that, you know, I need to trust that he will be okay with some stuff.

I mean, even things like not trying to organise him as much as I organise him and just let him make some mistakes. But also like instead of saying, "Do this. Do this. Have you done this? Have you phoned up? Did you do whatever?" You know, [maybe if] I just make a statement at the beginning of this week, "If you haven't completed one of those tasks in your enquiry project by Friday night you're not going to Immerse, which is this new church group that he's just got involved in, and he's only been twice, but [it's] another group that he's now with, and this morning I said to him, "Are you going to Unity?" which is another church group. She laughs, perhaps concerned at the reasons for her son's propensity for joining religious groups. "Are you going to Unity after school? Do I pick you up from Unity, or are you coming home to get your homework done before you go to band?" And he said, "Oh, no I'm going home to do my homework before I go to band," and I thought, "Phoof! That's good!" So, I mean just that comment that I made at the very beginning of the week, he must've realised that today's Thursday morning and he still hasn't done it and so he's obviously said, "Unity or Immerse, Unity or Immerse, 'cos I can't do both." And so he's just made a decision that he's not going to go to Unity tonight. He's gonna catch the bus home and I'll pick him [up], and so hopefully he'll make good choices with his time on his own.

"You felt you were directing his choices, or pushing him to choose?"

Oh, organising him to organise himself. Totally.

"Because he doesn't organise himself?"

Shocking. He doesn't [organise himself], yeah.

Since the workshop, Vivienne is trying to take a step back from controlling Leigh's choices, although *still setting a parameter* for her son's behaviour.

"He sounds so involved in everything. Were you like that? Is that what you meant

when you said you saw him making the same mistakes you'd made as a child?"

Oh! I did everything. I wanted to do everything. And I'd get myself to places, 'cos Mum wouldn't take me. And I went to everything: Brownies, and ballet, and youth group, and yeah, everything. I just added, continually added to things.

"Why did you do that, do you think?"

Oh, 'cos I just wanted everyone to like me, I just wanted to do everything. I just couldn't choose. I lost my best friends because I spent time with too many people.

Vivienne was concerned that her son was following too closely in her own footsteps and she wanted to help him avoid making the same mistakes that she believed she had made. *He's got this BIG circle of friends. He doesn't have this tiny core group. So, when he's feeling like he needs a friend, he doesn't know who to go to.* She describes how Leigh *used to make it fair for all his friends, you know, by being at the quadrangle before school – that's where the Grade 8s were – and at such-and-such at [another time], because that's where this [other] group of friends were. And then his friend who's in the special unit because he's got Cerebral Palsy, he just makes sure that he spends some time with him; goes to his house one afternoon.*

Our next-door neighbour said, "Oh, you play the saxophone, Leigh. I've heard you play. I run the Navy Band, and we need a saxophone player to do such-and-such." And Leigh said, "Oh, yeah! What day? When do you do it?" "Oh, Thursday night." And Leigh said, "Oh! Maybe it could be every second Thursday. Mum, maybe I can go to this band that [week, and the other band the next]." And I said, "You'll please no-one. You can't." "What am I gonna do?" And I said, "You have to say, 'No.'" "Oh!" Given his concerns about not missing any given opportunity, Vivienne believes that Leigh is anxious not to let others down – just as she had felt at about the same age.



This morning I put pressure on my son for the first time for a long time. I thought, "Oh, God! That's bad timing! Oh, God, just when Tammy's coming!" I go, "Oh, no!" she laughs, a year after our conversation about her new attitude to Leigh and his organisational skills.

I am pleased that the subject of Leigh has been raised spontaneously by Vivienne. "I was going to ask you about your son, because he 'loomed large' in the last interview," I recall.

Oh, he's a dill! Vivienne laughs in a concerned but affectionate manner about Leigh and his behaviours. *He still says, "I've gotta go to the movies with Warren," because Warren is*

the boy with Cerebral Palsy, "because I haven't been out with him all term." So he still does that sort of thing – plots who he's going to be friends with to make it FAIR. And it's his birthday on Sunday, and he's going to be 16, and I was saying, "Well, we've always promised you a 16th birthday party. What do you want to have happen?" And he said, "Oh, maybe I need to have a sleepover with these two people and then do something-or-other with this person." And I said, "But, why?" and he said, "Oh, because they don't get on," and I'm thinking, "He still does it!"

Vivienne now sees that her efforts to intervene in Leigh's decisions about friendship choice are probably pointless. *I don't try and organise his friendships any more, 'cos it's not gonna make a difference.*

She explains how Leigh had become part of a group on an overseas exchange to Japan. She feels that this has been a good experience for him, and has given him another circle of friends. She ruffles through some papers before finding an article in the Patterson High Newsletter. She points to a gangly youth with wild, woolly hair in the photograph accompanying the article. *That's him, looking a bit of a dork!*

Vivienne explains how Leigh has *wanted to try and earn some money* but had been *turned down for every normal sort of Grade 10 job* – those offered by the franchised take-away food and grocery stores. In the end, he'd thought, *"I know what I'll do! I'll teach piano."* *And we thought, "Dunno if it's quite that easy."* *But he put an ad in the school newsletters. So, he has five young students.* Vivienne is aware that Leigh's new venture has been good for him, *challenging his organisation[al] skills.* While she's had to *dig him out of holes still, quite often*, she believes that *they all love him. All the kids love him. He's really good at piano. Oh! But he's really good with kids. He's just really good.*

Vivienne now understands that it is good for Leigh to take on some responsibility, and that his piano teaching venture is helping to improve his organisational skills. He is doing something that he enjoys, and Vivienne can see that he is good at what he is doing. At the same time, she is able to provide him with the support he needs to maintain his enterprise, if he needs her help.



Reflecting back over the past year, Vivienne is able to see that there have been both personal and professional benefits to her attendance at the PD. *I mean I went to the training with a real purpose, a really clearly defined purpose, and I'm a fairly goal-orientated, purposeful sort of practitioner, and I mean I got surprised that I got emotionally involved. Oh, that really surprised me. You know, really involved, emotionally involved in other people's stories and in*

my own, and so I suppose that stayed with me, but you know, I still have come away with these learnings for my work and for my family life, and that's how I operate.



“I’m probably far more up-front with ... people”

Vivienne had previously been aware of the importance of body language, however in the week following the course she had incorporated this knowledge more fully into her practice; *reading the body language, [and] saying what you can see, not what you infer [from appearances] – making it far more explicit.*

To more fully illustrate what she means, she tells the story of an incident in the school corridor between two students; Jamie and his younger brother, Daniel. *So with Jamie, when he was forcibly getting Daniel into his classroom a couple of days ago, Daniel wouldn't hold his hand, and Jamie was insisting on holding Daniel's hand and slapping him around the backside, pulling him. And I said, "Jamie, what's happening? I can see you pulling at Daniel's jumper and trying to hit him on the bottom." "Yeah, because he won't hold my hand." I said, "But it's safe here. You don't need to hold his hand here [inside the building]." There had been some swearing and carrying on, so I tried to intervene to get Daniel to his classroom, but there was gonna be a disaster, and Daniel's going [making strangled, choking noises]. And I said to Jamie, "Oh, Jamie! I can see you holding your chin so tight. I can see your face is SO creased up." And he said, "It's 'cos I'm angry, eh!" And I said, "Yeah, but I can see this [explicitly describing to Jamie what she could see]" and then he sort of relaxed, and I said, "Great! I can see your face is a bit smooth now." And so just saying that; that was really good.*



A year later, she still considers that *some of the things as far as speaking to students are really what I've carried through; increasing her awareness of body language and feelings and how they're intertwined* is an important new understanding which has now become fully integrated into her practice. *Actually, it's really weird, because like I'm sure after the training there would've been other things that I would've thought were gonna be part of me forever, and I've forgotten those things. But something that still I'm really aware of, often, when I speak to children, is to tell them what I can see – in the way they're clenching their fist, or rolling their eyes or whatever. The reaffirming, when you say, "Look, I hear that you...", when you restate what you heard, the reaffirming part. And that's just become an automatic part of my repertoire.*

I recall how Vivienne had described the incident between Jamie and Daniel and how

she had “held a mirror up” for Jamie to help him to see what he was doing.

I still use that all the time. It works really well. I find that really, really good. It just calms the children down. I just do it all the time, “I can see your hands are clenched, and that you’re frowning. I can see lines in your face. What’s wrong?” And they go, “Mmm, mm.”

“They recognise, from what you’ve said, that there’s a physical manifestation of what they’re feeling?”

Yeah! Yeah. No-one else [from the MESH workshop] would probably mention that, but it’s really... she finishes her sentence with a laugh. She is aware that it is probable that each person in the group will develop different personal and professional insights from their MESH experience.

And the same with staff, when I’m working with staff. When I came here, people were grieving, big time, and [there were] lots and lots and lots, [of] huge staff issues as a result of some things that’d happened here, and so yeah, I’m doing FAR more counselling or supporting on a personal level with staff here than I ever did at Cherryvale, or in any other role. And I know the MESH training has really helped with that as well. Mm. The nature of the stuff that had happened [at Meadowbank] was part of the reason I was put here. So, yeah, a lot of adult conflict resolution, and a lot of parent bodies and staff support has been needed. It’s been a HUGE part of my role. It’s been a priority.

“Can you describe how MESH has helped with that?”

I’m probably far more up-front with asking people to come and talk to me individually. Far more than I used to be, and being able to say, “Well, look, what I’m hearing and seeing is this, and you need to know that...,” and then just talking through.

“So, it’s the same technique you’re using with the students, really?” I attempt to confirm my understanding of the procedure Vivienne is describing.

Oh, it is. It is. It is. And just being able to say, “Well, do you want help in saying to that person, or saying to that parent, that you want an apology? Do you want me to help you do that?” or whatever. So, I think I’m actually making a huge difference with staff in their ability to deal with things. But they needed that.

“It sounds from what you’ve said that it hasn’t been too good for staff, here?”

VERY different challenges. REALLY different challenges, but that’s really exciting. It’s been really good. It’s different – issues that are at Meadowbank and nowhere else, and that’s why I’m here, because of what happened. Vivienne cannot reveal the events which have occurred at

the school; she intimates that she has to keep these a closely-guarded secret. However, she does feel that her presence, and the skills that she possesses, benefit the school community. Additionally, she recognises that with the move to Meadowbank there's been a benefit to her self.

I think I probably look after myself more. I'm more proactive than reactive, but I think that's the nature of this school. This school is different. So, I work out strategic plans, and I can mostly follow them through, whereas at Cherryvale, because there were SO many people ALL the time; I was ALWAYS dealing with issues that wouldn't go away. And so it was reacting, reacting, reacting. No time to be really proactive. Here I get a little more space to do that. The decisions I make here are really, really crucial, or what I do here has more importance. I can work out how we go about doing those things we need, more because of the numbers; there's not so many people going "Whub-uh-uh." The priorities are just so different, but the immediacy of everything I do is not there. I don't have to do it yesterday, as far as some things, I just sort of go "Abhh!" Vivienne gives an audible sigh of relief, dropping her shoulders and slumping back into her chair, acting out the more relaxed nature of her role at Meadowbank.



"There's a greater need here for what I could do"

When Vivienne originally applied for the position at Meadowbank she'd been half-hearted about her application. In fact, she'd e-mailed shortly after she'd lodged the relevant documents to say that she was withdrawing from the selection process as she had realised that the appointment would conflict with leave she had planned.

Later, she was contacted by someone on the selection panel, *"We're just phoning up to see if you'd reconsider your leave?"* and I said, *"Absolutely not! I can't do that. I've made a commitment to the state volleyball team."* She explained to the caller that her daughter was a member of the team, and that, *"They can't go without me, and I've already booked. I can't renegotiate that, but it's fine, give it to the next person."* And they phoned back, and I said, *"Was I the only applicant?"* And they said, *"No, we had lots, but we REALLY want you to take it, for reasons we can't explain until after you've said you'll do it."* So... she'd phoned her principal, who was away, to let him know of her move, *and then the next day I was coming here to be shown the school. And then I was here on the Monday. No-one knew I was coming here, 'cos I didn't know myself 'til Thursday!*

She is unsure about how long the position will remain hers, as *originally, it was going to*

be until the end of term two, and then it was extended 'til the end of term three, but that's the million dollar question for everybody. Really. How long will it continue? Mm.

Sitting in her office in the front corner of the main school building, we are interrupted by the telephone ringing. "Do you need to answer that?" I ask, aware that at both of our previous meetings Vivienne's administrative and pastoral responsibilities had seemed both relentless and unavoidable.

Nub! she waves her hand in the air, brushing away the necessity of responding to the repetitive "brr-brr" of the telephone, before someone in the office answers the incoming call. The constant and intense work pressure she had been under at Cherryvale is not in evidence at Meadowbank. Here, Vivienne appears unhurried; she has the time available to devote to our conversation.

Aware of this new change in her attitude to work pressures, I ask her if she'd like to stay on at the school.

Yeah! I love it here. And people enjoy having me, and they've had a lot of uncertainty before I came. I'm probably the fourth person in 2 years, just being in the principal position here. Mm.

With many fewer students enrolled, the problems so evident to Vivienne at Cherryvale are not so at Meadowbank. *Not in the numbers. We have a couple at the very top of the triangle as far as behaviour goes. One's a Grade 2 boy. We've had to get support with a teacher aide with him outside. [His] Mum's really, really supportive, and sees that we've got ongoing stuff that happens with him. And then we've got an older student, who's in Grade 5, who's never been to school, who just doesn't have the social skills or the educational experience to form friendships, and he arrived a week before I did.*

"So, he's been home-schooled?" I ask. I know a few people of my children's age and older who have been very successfully home-schooled, but I've heard of other less positive cases, too.

Vivienne shakes her head sadly and rolls her eyes to indicate her dismay and the distress she feels at the neglect that has led this child to be starting school for the first time in Grade 5. But then she is keen to point out that there is *no comparison almost* between the numbers of cases being investigated by Child Protection Services, the state government's child protection agency, at her new school and her last. *I still get calls from Child Protection about individuals, but it's actually only two students here who have obviously got real home issues. And one of them is the boy that's in Grade 5. He's got huge issues.*

While Vivienne finds she's at work for more hours a day at Meadowbank, *the role is really different and I don't take stuff home*. It seems, too, that, because of the distance she now has to travel to work from her home on the other side of the city, she simply finds it easier to stay at work later, as this fits in with organising transport home for her children from their various after-school activities. *I get here at 8:00, and stay 'til quite late, but that also fits in with my family life, 'cos on a Monday and Thursday I pick my daughter up from Marylands at 7:00 – my husband drops her off at 5:00. So, it just fits well. Otherwise he's gotta hang around for 2 hours and take her home. But I have my meetings happen those nights wherever possible; parent sessions and whatever, so I can just do that.*

Supporting the families, and supporting kids appeared to take up most of Vivienne's day, and her energy, in her previous role. At Meadowbank, though, Vivienne feels that she has the potential to *do greater good with fewer people; kids, parents, staff, yeah. There's a greater need here for what I could do. I was probably doing things down at Cherryvale that someone else could do [just] as well [as I was able to do]. I can make a HUGE difference here, whereas down there it was just such a huge need that I could – oh!* Vivienne believes that the difference she was able to make at Cherryvale, whilst important, was just a drop in the ocean compared with the difference she can make at the much smaller Meadowbank Primary.



When our conversation ends, Vivienne offers to walk with me out to the car park at the front of the school. I thank her for the time she has given to my research project and for her willingness to share her stories with me. I inform her that as soon as I have completed the transcript of our final interview I will be sending the “next instalment” for her approval, before drafting “her” chapter. She laughs at the idea of her experiences eventually becoming a chapter in my dissertation: *It'll be a very boring chapter!* I disagree.

We hug and kiss each other “goodbye,” before she turns and walks back into the school that she has come to love.

Chapter 10

Jude Tomasz

"I'm too much from out left field"

When I first ask Jude Tomasz how much he knows about MESH, he answers, *Zero. Yeah, there you go!* Upon further quizzing, however, Jude admits to having read the outline of the 3 days, as well as having spoken to a couple of people at his school who have attended MESH on previous occasions. Their comments, however, weren't very informative. *Helen said, "Oh, look, it's a fantastic thing."* And another colleague, Max, had said, *"Oh, yeah, look, it's glorious."* And that's about it. *"It's very rewarding, and you're gonna learn a lot about yourself as well as [about] dealing with other people."* Jude's lack of knowledge about the 3-day PD hasn't concerned him, however, because it's his belief that *it's good going into something with a totally clear mind.* In the past, he's been open to exploring different experiences, *stuff like primal screaming¹ and all that.*

Although unconcerned, Jude confesses to feeling slightly confused by his selection to be among the current group of teachers from Clovelly attending MESH. As he works in a completely different section of the school from the others, he believes that he's been chosen *accidentally. I'm quite sure it's accidental. What happened was, somewhere along the way, one of the senior staff saw me and said, "Jude, I'd like you to go to this."* Although Jude is a little unsure of why this is so, he can *imagine a number of reasons. Teaching's a very hands-on thing, so the more you are able to deal with and assist students in their daily lives [the better].*

His attendance at the PD had been in some doubt on the day of our first interview. That morning, Jude had been told that *PD funds apparently have dried up. But once they said, "O-oh, hang on, Jude Tomasz[s name] is down [to do the PD]," Adrian, [the principal,*

¹ A primal scream is a scream uttered by a person undergoing primal therapy. Primal therapy is a form of psychotherapy in which the patient is encouraged to relive events, often screaming or crying to achieve catharsis and a breakdown of psychological defences.

had] said, "Oh, no, look, we'll find money [from] somewhere else to make sure he does go." So, that's what happened. And because Jude had previously contacted me and opted into my study, I was pleased that the school had managed to fund his attendance.



"I think you need some history"

Sitting at an antique mahogany dining table in the school's small formal meeting room during our first interview, Jude tells me that he regularly gets itchy feet; he likes to change jobs, move around, and experience new things. He has been teaching at Clovelly for almost a year. *The boss here goes, "Oh, look, are you going to stay here any longer than two years?" I go, "Oh, you guys have to make sure [that I don't get bored]. I get a bit bored and then want to move on." But that's life.*

Wondering what has prompted his principal's question, I ask Jude, who is 49 years of age, to tell me a bit about himself and his history in teaching. In response, he asks, *How far back?* and then, realising that I have probably assumed he's been a teacher for most of his working life, decides, *I think you need some history.*

I'm first generation Australian, from the two pound immigrants in 1955. Family of nine kids, well that's eleven. We're a huge family, but we're not close. Dad was from Poland. Mum was from Hungary. Jude's parents had lived in the one house since their arrival in Australia. Since his father's death a few years back now, Jude's 87-year-old mother has lived there alone. One house! I rejected that idea YEARS and years ago. There's little things in your life which make you reject ideas like that.

All of my other brothers and sisters were basically in trades and associated employment opportunities, and my mother decided I was going to be the one with a degree, he laughs fondly at the memory. Even though I enrolled at a Tech school, to be like my brothers, she said I'm the degree. So anyway, to cut a long story short, she made sure that she did [have a son with a degree]. So, yeah, as fate has it, I did. I ended up getting a [degree].

Initially, I went to uni for about 3 months and [then] pulled out 'cos I didn't know where I was going. So, anyway, I went into employment, just bits and pieces, jobs everywhere. And then decided on engineering, and I worked full-time and did my studies part-time. And so I did 4 years of part-time studies then had to go back and do a full year at the end to do my thesis, so I came out qualified. Engineered for X number of years and I was going further up the tree, and getting less and less contact with people. And at that stage, too, I was doing some youth work in a high school in

Melbourne, and I thought, "Oh, well, it's a good opportunity to get into teaching." And a situation arose whereby there was a big shortage of teachers in Victoria at that stage and the Education Department set up a trial of getting qualified people from industry, setting them up in a satellite campus. We would go to college 2 days a week, but we would be teaching 3 days a week from the word "go." So that way we had to develop our programs; you developed your own discipline straight away. You were involved with the full running of the school.

"Quite a different introduction to teaching, perhaps?" I comment, not previously having heard of this type of entry into the profession.

Phew! Extremely good, because there was basically no-one in the classroom to assist you so you really did have to develop your own skills and everything. So, yeah, that's how I got into teaching, and I've enjoyed it ever since, really.

Jude began teaching in 1986, but has had blocks of time away from the profession. *So, into teaching, loving it, a lot of involvement with outdoor ed, camps, the clubs within the school, 'cos it's just something that I believe in is that you have to have a good relationship with the kids before you can do anything else.* He first taught in a government state school in Victoria for a period of 2 years. Then for 6 months at St Peter's Catholic school before it closed. *Then 2 years at a school called Wandana, which was a school for the, ah, "fish that John West" reject.*²

"For what reasons were they rejected?" I ask. "Special needs, or behaviour?"

All of the above. And that's super intelligent, he scoffs. And they just, yeah, they just didn't fit in. I think that's the best way of describing it. The kids just didn't fit in, and we had an AMAZING success rate there of 85-90%. Ah, very intense, small classes.

Jude thoroughly enjoyed his time teaching at Wandana. He fondly recalls how every Friday afternoon the staff would sit down together to write reports over wine and cheese. *The reports went home every week for the kids 'cos the parents wanted to know how we were making development. We also had a lot of interaction there with support groups, either for families or for the kids as well, psychiatric units, you know, the whole range of agencies which helped us and we helped them. So, people would be referred to us from, let's say, a state school, and the state government would be funding it, so it was [a] private [school] but we got a lot of business through the state system. And then, before losing contact with reality, [I] moved on.*

² An inter-textual reference to an advertisement by the fish processing company John West, in which the company asserts that they reject for processing any fish of inferior quality.

Next, Jude taught at a state high school in Western Australia. After 2 years there, he and his family moved to Tasmania where he found teaching work, but a year later they returned to WA. Jude explained that his wife, Suzanne's family is from there, and that family ties have drawn his family back on a number of occasions.

Again, the family returned to Tasmania, and Jude taught for the following 2 years at Redburn High. *Beautiful school. ABSOLUTELY LOVING it. Got permanency. I was rapt. I was king of the castle!*

"And then?" I ask, sure that Jude's laughter and enthusiastic retelling herald a sudden change in circumstances.

Jude explains how he arrived home from work one Friday evening to find a message on his answering machine. A former colleague from overseas wanted him to work on a large project in the Middle East and had searched the Australian phone directories so as to contact him. *It was the last thing I actually wanted because we really were settled and we were in a nice house in a good area in the city, and had that all in control, and two, did we have two? Yeah, we had both boys then, and anyway, so we both thought, "Oh, well, we'll go over and have a look-see and see what's about."* Jude and Suzanne had then struggled to decide whether to move their family overseas. In the end they'd decided to go. *So, we went to the Middle East!*

A request to take leave from his teaching job in the state government school was declined, and disappointed by this turn of events Jude chose to resign his position.

His new job entailed travelling throughout the Middle East, and the family were overseas for a total of 2 years. Jude surprises me, for he hadn't taken another teaching position. *No, no, no, no, no, engineering.* He'd returned to his original profession.

After his contract with the multi-national company expired, he returned to Tasmania and began teaching in another state government school. *Anyway, Our Lady of Mercy's job came up. Got that. Was there for a couple of years. Very heavily in the scene involved with sport again. Introduced a couple of new sports there. Had a very good relationship there with the girls and then this one came up, and I just decided to move over here.*

And in between I did a trip back to the Middle East during the holidays to do more work. Applying for an extra week's leave from Clovelly to return to the Middle East was met with a very different response from the one he'd received when working in the public school system. This time, a

sensible principal [said], "Gee, Jude, that'll be great. What great experience." I think management [here at Clovelly] like that sort of thing. There've been quite a few people that've gone overseas and come back.

Given the career history Jude has just detailed, I can now better understand why the principal at Clovelly had asked Jude whether he was likely to be teaching at the school for any longer than 2 years. However, Jude seemed more positive about a longer stay at Clovelly than he has felt about other positions in the past. *I'm hoping that now that I've made my ground here, [and my son] Charlie's enjoying it here, I'll spend, you know, the next 10 years here. I'm hoping.* And this is despite the fact that the thought of being in one job long-term scares him.



A year later, he reaffirms his fear. *I got shivers down my back the other day when people were talking about, you know, "I've been in charge of tennis for 30 years," and "I've been in charge of [something else] for 20 years." Is that a good thing? Why are we congratulating them? Why didn't they move on after 10?* He laughs, and then explains his reaction to the conversation. *That's only because I'm frightened. Next year is the longest I've ever been anywhere. That's 3 years. And I'm very, very frightened about it. I'm frightened of being here for 3 years. This is gonna be 3 years. God! Too long,* he laughs again.



Unlike those of many teachers, Jude's school holidays are often spent undertaking consultancy work overseas. *I've still got that part of my business which I run on the side, just consulting work every now and then.* His experience of living and working in a different culture, he believes, has given him quite a different perspective to that of many of his teaching colleagues.

In his management position working in the Middle East, for example, Jude had drawn on and extended his understanding of the importance of relationships. He describes how the number of staff employed by the company that he worked for *went from 70 employees up to 170 over [a period of] 3 months. I was the manager then, so I had to have a good group of people underneath me who I had faith and trust in, who could relate what I wanted back to those working people. So, an understanding of the complexity of their society was essential. It wasn't just dealing with Anglo-Saxons and their work ethics, there was a religious side to it, [and] there was an extended family side to it. Very complex. Anyway, you take that [better understanding] back into the classroom when you go back in too.*

There's all sorts of things that you take for granted now [as a teacher]. I had a student teacher with me for the last 4 weeks, and there are things that, when you watch them operate and how you operate, there are just certain things which teachers take for granted – the skills that they've got – and a lot of teachers undervalue how much they can actually do for relationships. There's a huge number of skills that they learn.



“I throw myself in, feet and all”

From his MESH experience, Jude is *looking for more skills to pick up on how people display certain feelings. The biggest thing I'm thinking that I'm gonna be able to get out of it is insight into how people in trouble present [themselves] – which they won't be able to give much of that – 'cos it's silly having a tool to deal with people if you don't know that they've got a problem, and then the strategies I guess to deal with them, and then, I don't know whether they give [details of] organisations that you can be in contact with.*

I've got my own pastoral care group, but until you find out more about some of the kids, you know, whether it's Mum and Dad are splitting up, or whether it's Mum or Dad's got a drinking problem, or so-and-so, and he's lost a job or whatever. So if you can pick up things and then direct people to the right organisation. And then, having the systems set up in the school whereby you know who to pass it [the information on the child's situation] on to.

I could see a lot of [potential] benefits in it anyway in dealing with conflict, and being a mediator, and I've had to do that a fair bit in some of the previous schools I've been at, without the training, so to get more training, I believe, it's going to be able to enhance, hopefully, qualities which I've got, which are able to be used in that situation.



Because he has mentioned that he wants to develop a better understanding of how to recognise when people are having trouble dealing with issues in their lives, I ask Jude whether he believes there are significant issues that affect his students; issues relating to mental, emotional, social and spiritual health.

The biggest thing that you see in students is the change. Okay, you know, someone will be pretty joyful one day, and then bang! down, down on a flat. I've got a couple of students in Grade 9 who are very much like that. Oh, look, yeah, there's a whole range, actually. I can't sort of pick one.

A lot of the time you find out at parent-teacher [interviews]. They [the students' mothers] break down and cry. [For example, one mother said at an interview,] “Oh, you don't know how hard it is!

I'm a single mother, and I'm dealing with him and he's an absolute prick at home. His father works overseas for 4 months at a time and then comes back for a month and du-du-du-du." But I've got an amazing relationship with that guy [the woman's son] at the moment. But how did I make contact with him? It was a bit of rough play. A bit of tickling and all that, and he always comes back for more. 'Cos if [his] Dad's not there, then he's missing that.

As the subject of touch deprivation is often raised as a concern of teachers present at the MESH workshops, I suggest to Jude that perhaps this is an issue of concern in contemporary schooling.

Oh, look! Don't talk to me about it! It's one of the issues why I ended up leaving Our Lady of Mercy. Great school. Had a huge amount of respect from the girls. I believe I had respect from the parents and everyone. One of the heads [called me aside and was] talking to me, "Jude, look, I just have to talk to you about something. You were in a room, by yourself, with a girl." I go, "Hang on! I had the door open." "Yeah, yeah, I know, but this person [another teacher] was worried, 'Do you think it's a good idea that Jude should be in a room like that?'" So I was chastised for that and then in the same breath, though, he said, "But Jude, look, please don't take this personally." How in the bloody Hell [did he expect me to take it, except personally]?!

This one teacher's report voicing unease at the nature of Jude's relationships with the female students was, he believes, enough *to cause a ripple, and a ripple can cause something else*. The lack of trust displayed by his colleague unnerved him. *And the other thing, of course, was, I remember it so clearly, I was standing somewhere, and this woman [teacher] inadvertently just said, "Oh, you know what, Jude? It's gonna be [a] real shame that you won't go on a camp."* He pauses here, collecting himself. *And I thought* Obviously annoyed at the assumptions made by his colleague, he doesn't finish his sentence, but instead moves on to talk about the extra-curricular work he had engaged with at the girls' school.

But I did a lot of coaching of the girls. I had a lot of training with girls up at the athletics. I would put a lot of time in, yeah. Again, the hurt of his colleague's lack of trust surfaces. *No, okay. It was true, to a certain extent, what if something happened? And I thought, "Hmmm, you'd have to be a brave, brave person to be working – a male – in a primary school." There's only a few [male teachers who would choose to do the wrong thing with students], but you only need a couple to do that, and it tarnishes a whole group of people.*

Jude's comment that his colleagues' lack of trust was one of the reasons for him leaving Our Lady of Mercy causes me to wonder aloud about whether it will make

any difference which school he teaches in; that this issue may still be raised by colleagues elsewhere.

Well, you're dead right, it could be, exactly. But that's never been a question, if anything [here]. I feel as though, rightfully or wrongfully, I'm able to do a lot more. I am a fairly tactile person, and ah, hand on shoulder, you know. That's okay. The kids [here] and I've got a great relationship. But I had that relationship there, too, but you had to be really careful of what goes on.

Occasionally, too, Jude's students cause him to reflect on the appropriateness of his behaviour with them. *Look, there's a guy who's pretty rough and ready and I took the Mickey Mouse out of him the other day, and he got really bitter [about that]. I go, "Oh, fair go. You do this"* The student's response to Jude's reasoning had indicated to Jude that the student didn't believe Jude's behaviour was appropriate to his role, *"Yeah, but you're a teacher."* And I go, *"Oh!" you know, and I said, "Oh, oh well, point taken."* Oh, *I'm always ready to, you know, if I go the wrong way, I'll always be ready to sort of, you know, I won't argue the point with them. I go, "Fair enough. Sorry." I'll apologise.*

Sometimes I look at [incidents like] that and go, "Oh, jeez, I'd better calm down a bit and become a bit more [like a] senior person. I can't be acting like a 20-year-old still, 'cos the kids don't know how to take it." I'm too much from out left field, yeah.

And yet, the one interaction between Jude and a student that I witnessed, despite it being a physical encounter, a boys' rough-housing, was clearly a positive one for both Jude and the student. We had been leaving the meeting room and the passage outside had several people in it. One of these was a student. Jude gave the blonde, curly-haired boy a friendly shove into the wall with his shoulder. The boy responded well to this interaction with his teacher, telling Jude to "Watch it!" Both Jude and the student walked away from this incident grinning from ear to ear.



Jude admits that he is happy in his current position at Clovelly. *I throw myself in, feet and all, and um, Suzanne gets a bit tired of that at times, 'cos she doesn't see much of me, but, I'll give you an idea of it. Tonight I've got Grade 7/8 soccer, that's at 5 o'clock, and then I'm gonna stay after that and I referee a couple of senior adult games, which is good for exercise. Tuesday after school I've got the Grade 5 soccer over there, then I come straight home. Wednesday I've got rowing with the school, and I'm lucky there, because I, if I didn't have MESH, which is going to take me until 5:00, my two teams are rowing [against] each other, so I wouldn't have to be there until 6:30 and then I'm only there for three quarters of an hour, so that would've been good. Thursday, straight*

after school, or just before the end of school, I've got training for soccer, so there's 4 nights, yeah, but the Tuesday night I'm home early and the Thursday night, you know, it's as if I'm just doing after school [supervision/ duty].

But then there's a whole range of other things that happen. On Tuesday, it's Evan's team which I coach. I've always gone to both my boys' sports, and the reason I do the badminton is that that gives me weekends free, 'cos it's not a weekend sport. Cycling – there's the other thing I do, too. Oh, and I like getting people involved in things. I've got a few of the guys here into soccer now. But cycling, I've got a new guy here doing some cycling with me, but from Our Lady of Mercy's I've still got a group of people who I cycle with, and we do some of the big events around the state.



“I’ve got a secret agenda”

Jude *didn't hesitate* when it was suggested that he attend the MESH workshop. Part of his reason, he whispers conspiratorially with a grin, is that he has *a secret agenda*.

Jude explains that he'd originally been *quite surprised that Clovelly enrolls a huge range of students, okay, it's not just academically thingo [oriented]. I think we still have to do more work in catering for them [the students with special needs], especially in the latter years. I don't know whether the clientele's changed here or that the clientele has always been here, but I can see a subgroup of a Wandana³ within the school. And you'll have parents willing to pay for that, no worries. There's more things, other than achievement and things like that.*

Jude believes that a niche market exists that Clovelly could easily service. The *state system used to have Camleydale. Suzanne, when she first came to Tassie, that's where she was first working, and then they closed it down. “Nope, we're gonna have integration,”* he says in a somewhat derisive tone. Jude is referring to the 1999 state government decision to adopt an inclusion policy⁴ whereby children with a disability or a learning problem, some with very high physical, mental, social, emotional or behavioural needs, were taken out of special school settings and placed in regular classrooms in schools throughout the state. It is clear to me that Jude believes children with special needs deserve an equitable education; his criticism, however, is that the *bloody idiots didn't*

³ The school for students with special needs mentioned earlier in this chapter, on p. 255.

⁴ The Tasmanian “policy states that schools must ensure: ‘that all students have equitable access to the benefits of education irrespective of their sex, culture, linguistic background, race, location, socioeconomic background or disability. They must pursue equity for all enrolled students but should especially focus on those groups of students who are known to gain significantly less from their

fund it properly!

In a setting such as the one he imagines, *things like group work, communication and self-development, of course, are at the middle of it. I mentioned it to someone about a month after I was here, and they said, "Tomasz, now slow down."* *Hah!* The person he had consulted had advised Jude to "find his feet," rather than dreaming up notions which might be considered fanciful – especially within the context of the well-established Clovelly School steeped in the time-honoured tradition attractive to its existing parent body.



Since undertaking the PD, Jude is incorporating MESH into his vision, seeing it *as being universal* in its application. He is confident that MESH can integrate well into an inclusion setting within the existing school structure. His idea is to *incorporate mathematics and sciences, which are really catering for those kids – the kids that I'm dealing with in some of the lower classes, if you came in here and had a look*, he pauses and shakes his head. His concern for his students with low ability is obvious.

In the alternative curriculum that Jude envisages, emotional outcomes for students are as important as employment outcomes. *"What do you want, Mum and Dad?" "Oh, I want them to feel good about themselves." "Do you want them adequately employed?" "Yeah, yeah, yeah." "Okay, we've got a program. This is the program, and we're gonna make sure he's really suited for it. He's gonna come against, you know, some of his own devils,"* he laughs. And he believes that the outdoor education property that the school uses would be ideal for accommodating his vision. *What a perfect spot!*

Jude can foresee the potential contribution of MESH to the overall self-development of students at Clovelly.



A year later, Jude is still concerned that *part of the problem with Clovelly is that we do have difficult kids here. And, I relate to them enormously, at the cost of the other kids. But the school still looks at them as, "Nah, too much trouble. We'll discharge them; tell them to leave the school."* *I would dearly love to see a chapter [like Wandana] in Clovelly – because the state system says that you're not allowed to do it any more – it's integration [now]. I would like to see a chapter where we could sell a certain part of the school as looking after and giving kids of various backgrounds a good break in life.* Jude has made a submission to the principal; *it's on his desk now. Oh, look,*

education than the population as a whole. Equity for all students can be pursued through inclusive educational practices” (Division of Education, Tasmania, 1999, as cited in Foreman, 2001, p. 47)

it's always played on the back of my mind, but it's a very hard issue. I don't want to be beating a drum [out of time. I'm] one person and there's 80 other ones going, "Don't be stupid. This is an independent school and we're gonna do this?" [But] you can have a private school catering [to these students]. There's a beautiful market out there for it. I think it'd just be perfect. And we've got the facilities. I don't think the state system does it well.

But there'd be another group of people [within the school] that'd go, "No, no, no, no, that's ..." you know. It's even hard to get the mindset away from – we're starting to get there – [the belief] that everything's [got to be] tertiary orientated. It's a numbers game; it's exams, exams, exams. It's not exams [that are important]; it's personal relationships. It's giving them tools to go out into society. Parents will be happy as long as we're successful with them [the students]. They're not worried about whether it's gonna be success at tertiary level. They want [their] kids to be successful. "It doesn't matter what you do with them, please make 'em feel good." Oh, I've got kids in some of my classes this year [whose parents have said], "Thanks! Look, they're coming home, they're very happy, they're pleased" Jude believes that it is his relationship with his students and his attitude to their teaching that improves their engagement with education.



"I looked at them far better, as individuals"

Immediately upon turning on my voice recorders at the beginning of our second interview, Jude says that the MESH training has *already been beneficial personally, [within my] family, and [at] school.*

A lot of the things that I've taken from MESH have already come into the classroom, which I'm RAPT in! I looked at them [the students] far better, as individuals, which was fantastic. And the realisation that – see we all know it but we don't do anything about it – the realisation that we all do come from a very individualised background. And that if we can identify those backgrounds we're able to deal with people a lot better. That's the one step is the identification that we're all individuals and to me I now walk in and there are quite a few different faces looking at me, rather than a mass of [students].

The thing that I really want to get going is the group work and then dealing with why the people I'm dealing with are SO different. I'm quite sure it's just like everyone else, like [those] who were at MESH, we carry a lot of garbage, and, unless we start dealing with the garbage, they carry it. You know, there's Mr Noisy over there, there's Mr Guy-Who-Just-Keeps-Doodling, there's Mr So-and-So who's an absolute jerk for whatever reason. Why is this?

Like other teachers from Clovelly who have attended the training, Jude is unsure why the school funds their attendance – so that they can run support groups, or for their own personal growth. He had returned to Clovelly full of enthusiasm for facilitating a support group for his students or his tutor group, and had contacted Gordon Royce to ask about this possibility. *And I guess the question is, for me then, as I said to Gordon [in the e-mail I sent to him], “Where to from here?”* Like Vivienne,⁵ Jude’s concern is that, if he misses the opportunity to implement his new skills immediately, much of what he has learnt will be lost to him, and to the school. He admits to feeling *a little bit sad* at the news from Gordon that there are, in fact, no expectations or plans for him to run a student support group in the foreseeable future.⁶



*And there were so many good statements made at MESH with regards to, you know, “Why did you get angry?” “Oh, they weren’t listening to me.” Well, you know, they were breaking one of my rules. [At MESH, I learned that] when people get angry [the reason is that] there’s an expectation [of theirs] which hasn’t been met.*⁷

MESH makes you a lot more aware. It bares everything in front of you, and then you have to start looking deeper into yourself, but also into the kids, and understanding that, “Oh, Mr Tomasz, when I asked you a question a few minutes ago...” How badly does that feel [for that student] if

⁵ See Vivienne Deane’s narrative account (p. 230).

⁶ I contacted Gordon Royce by e-mail to mention the confusion felt by several Clovelly staff members with whom I had spoken. I also asked him to explain why staff members attend the MESH training. He replied:

“In response to that I think it has been a communication breakdown in that for some anyway, they really don’t understand or believe what they are told.

“People who have attended MESH from here, attend first and foremost as individuals for their own personal well being and benefit. Despite this being said they seem to think that cannot possibly be true. I think that happens because they are pre-programmed in their thinking – used to having money spent on them for a return purpose that is easily measured e.g., new ideas for creative writing, curriculum change, classroom management skills etc. – all stuff they take back to their school and share or introduce and so on.

“MESH is about their personal growth, to challenge their thinking about kids, to revisit who they are and why they are in the job, at least to some degree. It’s a reminder that teaching is not just about getting curriculum and shoving it down unwilling throats. MESH is about making them better teachers but in a way they may not have recognised before.

“Yes – some will be expected to co-facilitate or facilitate and they will know that’s going to be an expectation (e.g., if they are going to be or are a Year 7 Tutor) ... or they may want to run a group or something of their own as a result as well ... who knows – but that is not a prime reason for their attendance.

“Interestingly this year I could not get any funding for more staff to do MESH – the reason given that I’d had lots over recent years.” (Gordon Royce, Clovelly School counsellor, personal communication, October 10, 2006).

⁷ In the case that Jude had mentioned, the broken, but unspoken, rule might be something resembling, “When I speak, others should be courteous and listen to what I have to say.”

you don't answer [his or her question]? 'Cos there's something hurt there, you know, and oh, I've whitewashed that a fair few times [in the past].

Jude relates to me part of a conversation he had with his son, Charles, reflecting this same thinking about taking another's perspective. He'd replied to his son after a request, "Yeah, Charles, I'll be with you in a moment," but had quickly changed his mind. "Hang on, I'll be with you now. I'm gonna come with you right now," and Charles, surprised and somewhat taken aback by his father's willingness to immediately see to his son's needs, said, "Oh, Jesus! That's a change." "Yeah," Jude had said, "Isn't it?! Haven't done this for a [while]. Let's do it!" Unsure, perhaps about his father's commitment to the idea, Charles had responded by saying, "Yeah, but you won't stay." "Let's see what happens," Jude had said, not wishing to argue the point.

Jude has also been thinking about how he groups students for class work, *looking at how groups work better now, so that I can get more interaction through them and more transfer [of knowledge]. And the structure in them: listening to each other, rather than talking over people. You know, a lot of that you'd say, "Oh, shit, Jude! That should be happening anyway!" But sometimes kids don't understand that.* His newly developed understandings have led Jude to change some of his teaching practices, as well as his expectations of students.



In our final interview, the changes to in-class group work that Jude discussed during the previous interview are also mentioned. *I make sure I don't make it confrontationalist, that, you know, if a person hasn't got the strength there, I don't force the issue. I make sure that, "Okay, well perhaps we'll come back to you later on."* I also throw out challenges to people. *And I've found it really good with one of my Grade 10 maths groups. I've got an Asian community in there who prefer to sit at the back and so I tried moving them around into different groups and making, trying, wanting the other guys to support them.* This arrangement went well for a while, *but then they migrated back. And I go, "Oh, okay, they've done that," so back again. Also making sure that the group felt comfortable with them there, and when I was asking questions of those four, I made sure that it was questions that they'd be able to answer. And then to draw them in, so it was all about questioning, getting the feeling right, making sure that they were able to participate without being threatened.*

He is aware of making small changes *in the classroom*, but even *more so in tutor group*. *Because of my own self-awareness, then I guess I became more aware of the individuals and the backgrounds of the individuals and I made a point of making sure that I knew a lot more about*

them, indirectly. Sporting interests, or family interests, various points like that. And just show a genuine concern. But there are still students there who are very difficult to make contact with. Very difficult. But then they're different in different classes, and different in different environments, which I've found out.

Yeah, so it just, you know, MESH was fantastic for me [in] that it reinforced how I feel about a lot of things. It wasn't nothing new. I didn't find it threatening to me.



"It enables you"

During our first interview, I learn a little of the detail of Jude's family life. *Suzanne's my second wife. She's from a previous marriage as well. We met on a bushwalking trip. Jude and Suzanne's sons are aged 16 and 11 years. There's a five year gap due to a miscarriage between the two births, which affected them both in a big way really, because we didn't really have enough time to grieve.* One son is studying in year 5 at Clovelly. The other is in Grade 11 at another local independent school, where he had boarded during his Grade 7 year, while the family was living in a remote area overseas. His elder son had wanted to remain at his school, and Jude had been loath to move him to Clovelly. *Just look at his history. Look at how many schools he's been at [because of our travelling].*

It is evident to me, during our first interview, that Jude is intelligent, athletic, and sensitive, and that he has a sense of humour. What I don't realise, however, are the difficult circumstances of his life outside of school. And, if it wasn't for my group experience with Jude, I doubt that I would ever have learnt of the emotional pain associated with his personal life.

During one of the early MESH group sessions, Jude revealed to the group his wife's dependence on alcohol. This topic is one that he had never discussed with anyone prior to his group experience. However, despite the secrecy which has surrounded this subject in the past, he found it relatively easy to talk – both within the group setting and during the following interviews – about the impact of this issue on his life and the lives of their two sons. So it seems that, for Jude, and for me too, at our second interview, something resembling a debriefing is what was really needed.

I think that [the ease I felt in discussing Suzanne's alcohol dependency] was because of the group and the building up of, having um, what do you call it? He taps three times on the desk as he tries to recall a word that won't come readily to mind.

“Trust?” I suggest in an effort to aid his recall.

Yeah, trust. I guess trust, yeah. I hope it's trust. Oh, God! Gee, I just think if those five [colleagues] are talking about me. Who knows? I'm not quite sure if he is seriously concerned or joking; I've noticed that Jude has a quirky sense of humour. I say that I don't believe this of his colleagues. No, I don't think so either. We all said that confidentiality [pledge], and I tell you, Jesus Christ if you say it eight times then you must be confidential! The thing is that that's how I felt, that everything was purely confidential, and there's no use pretending that you're someone else. I've never been able to do that [anyway]. And that was the whole idea of the group work and the discussion groups. I mean, "Here's a main topic and this is a challenging thing." "Oh, okay. You want to hear about some challenging things? I'll give you some challenging things!" Jude laughs. "There's one! Take that one!" He laughs again, down-playing the social and personal impact of the issue he divulged during the group session.

Within the group setting, however, Jude had felt safe disclosing the effect on him of Suzanne's alcohol dependency *because it was [behind] closed doors*. “Gee whizz,” he'd thought, *“this is a really great opportunity to find out, you know, to let it loose and see what happens. Ah, you know, what is going to happen here, as part of a group?” That just was REALLY nice, to let loose, let go of it in an environment like that. So, you know, and that starts the mending process of where do we go from here in trying to work it out.*

Jude describes how his newly found understanding of the process of enabling⁸ has come as *a bit of a shock actually. But it is very true. 'Specially with, you know, because it's in the open, but only within the group, with Suzanne and her drinking. Now look, it may have come across a lot worse than what it is but she has got a drinking problem which she can't control, and whether it's fully-blown alcoholism or not, Suzanne doesn't realise how much it affects the running of the rest of the family, and that's the sad part.*

We usually sit down and have a few drinks on the Friday, and I forget how I said it, but I said, “Ah, Suzee, I'll be honest with you straight away. One thing I have learnt from the [MESH] course is that by me either going down and buying you drinks, or me saying it's okay, or me drinking with you, is just making things worse. And the word was that it “enables” you to continue on without feeling bad, and [the enabling] it's stopped for me.” And I said, “Look, I'll be there to assist you, but I'm not going to encourage you.”

⁸ People sometimes believe that by their actions they are helping an addict, but to help is to do something for someone that they are not capable of doing themselves. Enabling, however, is doing for someone things that they could, and should be doing themselves. When someone enables an

Jude explains how, in the past, he's enabled his wife's drinking by giving in to her requests for him to purchase alcohol for her, making excuses for her behaviour, and by performing most of the housekeeping and child-rearing chores. *It breaks my heart at times, you know, but it's gonna break both our hearts if she continues on. Look, she's got an amazingly low self-esteem at the moment, about herself, about how she fulfils her role in life. She'll be one of the first people who would say, and I've said it to her, and she agrees, that the last thing she should've done in life was have children. I'm serious. Loves her kids, but, er, um, look, for many years, you know, for many years I just felt I was a single parent.*

Out of MESHing though, it's gonna be good, and I said it early in the piece when I was there, selfishly I've come to sort of look at how I can I help myself [come through this difficult time] as well. And selfishly that's true, but the reverse side of that is though, if I'm feeling better about myself, about family, and that, then you take that [different perspective] wherever you go as well.

It's strange, [we live in] the lucky country and we haven't got problems, but when you sit down and talk about the suicides, the alcoholism. But you know, MESH, I just see it as an amazingly powerful tool with regards to all sorts of things. And part of society's problem I find is that we're becoming more and more closed off. More and more withdrawn. More and more I'm busy with my sort of needs rather than someone else's needs.

Suzanne has been drinking for years and years, years and years. What I should've done, I'll tell you now, what I should've done was left Suze. Years back. Because, yeah, I don't think she's gonna change, which is really, really sad. And she doesn't realise how hurtful and damaging a lot of the things she does [are], either to me, [or] to the boys.

Look, MESH, uhm, I forget what day it was, Day 1 or Day 2, it might've been after the family sculpture, luckily we had another day after that, 'cos I just thought, 'Nah, pack up! Pack up and go. Too much wasted time already [within our marriage]. Too much wasted time in trying to make something better, and the other party's just not partaking in it.' And I thought, "No, you have to cut your losses." I've seen a lot of, I've got two friends – one female and one male – who have absolutely destroyed families due to drinking and drug abuse, and it never worked because the frightening statistic is, and that's why I knew it so well, is that only four percent succeed.

And Suzanne's father's an alcoholic. Mind you, she hates him for it.

Jude believes he's *lived a very solitary life*, primarily because of Suzanne's addiction. *And that's why I do go out and have the sport, and the mateship, and the friendship which I get there.*

addict they create an environment within which the addict can avoid confronting the effects of their addiction and, therefore, comfortably continue his or her unacceptable behaviour.

That's why I go to the school – heaps of people around. My sport's [one of] my strategies. I get release from it. I get a lot of enjoyment. I get the socialisation.

I'm just reflecting now. I think I'm very fortunate that I've had some relationships, previous to Suzanne's [and mine], where I've been able to feel very free about my emotions, and the people were very kindred spirits. Shawna [with whom I experienced primal screaming] was fantastic with regards to allowing full expression of [emotion]. But anyway, yeah, a number of different ladies there who were strong, or, you know, who were bush-orientated, or things like that. So, I've had a good life there. He pauses. Just picked [the wrong woman to marry]. The question could always be, "Oh, how would you feel if your marriage broke up?" If someone said, "Jude, how would you feel if your marriage broke up?" And I go, "Oh, well. I don't know. Relief, I guess."



Our conversation turns to Jude's awareness that there are similarities between his father and himself. *I know damn well that I was nurture/nature and I know where I've got certain traits from; Mum and Dad. Jeez, my Dad put up with a lot of shit for so many years. I still think of him every day. And, what am I doing? Exactly the same thing. Seriously, I'm a leaf out of his book, and he meant so much to me. And quiet, not quiet as in quiet, but quiet as in don't make too many waves, because it doesn't get anywhere 'cos people are just gonna get injured.*



Over the course of our second interview, Jude tells me about the break-down of another relationship; the one between Suzanne and their two sons. Since MESH he is more acutely aware that the boys' future decision-making is based on the only understanding of parental and family relationships with which they are familiar. For this reason, their capacity in this area is of great concern to him. *So, projecting into the future, shit! What's Evan and Charlie gonna see in who they chase up to be their wives. And I, back in time, picked the wrong one. I'll tell you that now. But I'm happy to wear that, because there are lots of good times. There's times when the bad outweighs the good. But, what are they gonna be looking at? Hang on. Are they gonna be drinkers? Are they gonna be the ones who do the work around the house while someone else is lounging around? Or are they gonna be the lounge-arounders? You know, so all of those things [concern me]. It worries me every day. Of course it does.*

See, I don't think I would be speaking this openly if I wouldn't have been MESHeD. But in a way that's good though, because [talking with] someone [like you] who's unattached [to my family situation] is a good way to be [reflecting on my life] because that way it goes, "Oh, that's it!" Participation in the interview process provides Jude with an opportunity to reflect

upon circumstances in his life, and allows him the opportunity to debrief after the emotional intensity of his sharing at the 3-day workshop.

As an outcome of MESH, Jude has considered having the family attend counselling sessions with Relationships Australia, but he hasn't taken the idea any further. *I don't know how it would go down with Suzanne*, he says.



Twelve months on, Jude has made a few changes at home. He still isn't sure about whether Suzanne will accept the idea of counselling, however, he is trying to be more up-front by telling his wife how he feels about issues affecting their lives. She's noticed this change in him and has said, *"Previously you used to go all quiet, and now you say this"* And I go, *"That's right. Isn't that better? Suzanne, I'm not trying to be hurtful to you. I'm trying to do this so that you understand."* Not sure. *I still fall back in there [into my old defences] at times. But normally, yeah, a little bit more ownership of who I am, instead of trying to be someone else. It's caused some feathers to be ruffled.*

However, despite the ruffled feathers, Jude believes that the changes he's attempted are for the best. *They have to know who you are. It's no good sort of pretending and then, what used to happen [at home] is that I'd explode. But now, because that [expression of my feelings] does happen, I think you can find yourself more openly loving, and people accept you for who you are. It's fairly obvious that I've come out of this a lot better.*



Reflecting on the impact of his story on the other MESH group members, Jude is hopeful *that they could grow from hearing how I grew. And the experiences I had. I think the purpose [of telling that story] was that we grow from life's experiences and this is an example of how I grew from life's experiences.*

I would think that I [also] gained from listening to [other] people's stories. If it was a personal experience that they went through, which it is, normally, I'd go, "Oh, gee that's interesting. And how does that affect that person?" I quite often look at how people's experiences have affected who they are now. And then, you're telling stories, and people get very emotional. And, when you hear stories like that, then you go, "Oh, yeah, I can understand that," or "Oh, that's why they've got that behaviour." It's something that perhaps contributes to that understanding. And, especially when you've let go of quite a few things. Over the 3 days.



“I’m a bit more vigilant”

In our first interview, Jude says that he has been deeply affected by the deaths, within a 6-month period, of three people close to him. The result of this experience is that he now believes it is important to *make sure that you make the most out of life, and get on with things. I try to encourage kids to do that. The biggest consequence there, I guess, is that sometimes I’m not hard enough on students and also my kids at home.* However, based on new understandings gained from his MESH experience, Jude has changed his classroom practice. *I think the way through that is to be more definitive about rules. And following up.*

“Making sure that you’re not enabling them?” I check that we are both thinking along the same lines.

Yeah. ’Cos once that’s done, you end up giving ’em wrong messages. And if you do make a rule, make sure you follow it through. That’s been happening in classrooms [now]. I’d been letting them have a free hand before and [after MESH] I said, “Okay, guys, look. That’s all very well that you’re talking, but what I’d like to see is this amount of revision done by the end of the two periods, otherwise the consequence will be [that] you’ll have to stay back during recess.” Jude is setting some limits with his students, *as much as I can, drawing a line in the sand.*

I’m a bit more vigilant [too] about how kids present in classrooms. And a bit more aware that if a student is arriving late, you know, questioning in a round-about way, why [that’s happening]. Jude has been keeping an eye on his students to see that there are *no definitive changes in moods or appearance. I’m keeping more vigilant, sort of, getting into conversations without asking the whys but just general conversations.* In his pastoral care role, Jude is building on his awareness of the importance of having good relationships with his students. He is more conscious that there is a need to be observant of changes in the way his students present, and that this change will only be obvious to someone with whom an established relationship exists.



“A gift for life”

Jude describes his MESH experience as *my environment totally.* In an e-mail that he sent to the school counsellor following the workshop, he had said, *“Thanks for a gift for life,” because if you make those changes, you know, the personal contacts which were made during that [time], and the openness, it takes people a long way, I think, if you’re open to that. I’m far too open. People are able to read me pretty openly, there’s nothing hidden, you know, there’s nothing*

hidden in me, so, to me, that [MESH group experience] was just a natural progression of [me] being open, and a lot more.

But, personally, I learnt a lot of things, like it's okay to say, "No." I aim to please a lot of the time, in the family situation. I've still got a long way to go with that with regards to, um, I do a lot of things to please myself – don't get me wrong – and there's a lot of things I do there to keep peace in the family, which I shouldn't be doing, because that's basically enabling.

I've already said to Suzanne, "Look, if you ever get an opportunity, I think it [attending MESH] would do you an AMAZING world of good." Given what he has already told me about Suzanne, I suggest that she may find MESH quite confronting. Oh, I think it'd take her somewhere where she needs to go desperately. It would give her strategies which she won't take from me, because what I saw [as being] wrong for quite a few years is that [Suzanne's] symptoms were being treated instead of [their] causes. Jude describes his wife's use of sleeping tablets, painkillers and anti-depressants, and how, during consultations with her doctor, she has failed to disclose her drinking. And I really hate the medical profession for that. Yeah, that not looking at WHY sleepless nights, and what ARE the strategies, you know?

I think it [MESH] gives you strength and tools to be able to deal with these things a lot better. And I don't know how I'm going to do it yet, and I think I'm only going to be able to do it one-on-one, which is going to be difficult, but I am going to try and start incorporating it with my oldest boy, and the youngest boy. And, Suzanne later on.

It's helped me reiterate who I am. I think I've had that ability, but it made me revisit myself with regards to, yeah, it confirmed that I'm a good guy. I keep my little badge [MESH nametag] at home on my study desk. 'Cos it's just that little reminder back [to my time at MESH], you know, you go, "Oh, hang on!"

"Like tying a string around your finger to keep you from forgetting?"

Yeah! It is, and with the boys at home it's good. It's been working well, yeah. [I've been working at] not getting too uptight about things, you know, being, "Alright, let's talk about these things." A bit more open. A bit more honesty. A bit more "I statements."



A year after the interview during which Jude had described MESH as *a gift for life*, I am absolutely stunned, and more than a little disappointed, by his response when I ask him what he recalls of the 3-day workshop. *Nothing! I'm serious. [When you contacted me about this interview,] I go, "Oh, no! What am I gonna be asked?" I had to go back and have a*

look at the MESH booklet, and I thought, “Yeah, look, I’m doing some of that stuff, but it’s individual stuff still. The school’s not doing it as a collective.

Jude no longer believes that being chosen to attend MESH was an accident, however. Instead, he has come to the realisation that *the school, inherently, has got the students and staff as their main concern, and the broader public. So that’s why they send us. It was a good thing to do individually and as a group. You can see that we’ve got a great feeling of mateship through most people. But, yeah, other than that, no. MESH is distantly in the past. Which is a sad thing, because I came out of there feeling amazingly refreshed, amazingly, feeling full of, you know, knowing a lot more about me and a lot more tolerant of a whole range of issues around me.*

“What sort of things did you find out about you?” I follow up Jude’s response.

Oh, just being honest, and being up-front, rather than trying to pad out things where you were perhaps trying to be not so disruptive on someone. No, that’s not coming out right. Um, he pauses attempting to put words to what he’s learned about himself. Yeah, oh, just awareness of me as a person. Weaknesses. Strengths. Ah, positives. Communication skills. Looking on the back of that certificate that you receive is [something that gives me] a real buzz. You know, and to make yourself feel good about things like that. Yeah, they’re all the things if I go back to [my memories of] MESH: invigorated, knowing a bit more about the people who I was with. Yeah.

I read the certificate again, and looked at the back of it. It’s not just about me. It’s [also reminded me] about other people there. I mightn’t remember all the names and that, but I remember that for someone who doesn’t know me [very well] to think that [about me] is a big thing. And that happens every day. In society it happens every day; how I perceive myself, how society perceives me, and how I perceive them. Sometimes I don’t take that into consideration sufficiently. Perhaps I’ve been too easily disappointed. Despite Jude’s assertion earlier in the interview that he recalls little of his MESH training, a little further into our conversation, his reflections show that his experience has been affective in increasing his awareness of self, others and interpersonal relationships.

He is easily able to tell me what the best thing was – personal, professional, or both – about his participation in MESH. *Oh, I think there’s no doubt about it, it’s gonna be personal. Yeah, more aware of who I am, my capabilities, inabilities, all of those. I think I came out a far more whole person. And more considerate of other people. I’m not saying I wasn’t considerate before, but just more aware of other people’s needs and how to try to get through [to them], and have success in those areas.*

When I ask what he believes is enduring of the personal and professional outcomes

from the MESH training, Jude asks, *Can you really distinguish between them?*

“Hmm, okay. You don’t think you can?”

I don’t think so. Life’s life. I get myself into a lot of trouble, because I’m Jude Tomasz. I am who I am.



Seeing me out

Jude walks with me to the reception area, telling me as we walk that I should keep in touch with him by e-mail. We hug goodbye. It seems that our interview has again caused Jude to think, because as he holds the door from the reception area to the outside world open for me, he mutters, *Family Australia, Family Australia* as though he is making a mental note to himself to arrange family counselling. “Relationships Australia,” I correct. *Same thing*, he says.

I stroll back towards my car, taking a path that wanders between the beautiful, historic buildings and through the leafy, green, well-manicured gardens of the school. As I walk, however, my mind is occupied by deeper thoughts. I wonder to myself whether Jude will ever make that call.

I wonder what it takes to change the patterns of a lifetime.



The conversation continues

That might have been where my knowledge of Jude and his story ended if this research had been conducted as any other type of study. However, because narrative inquiries are relational,⁹ I had maintained some contact with Jude and my other participants since the agreed series of three interviews¹⁰ had been completed. A few months after our final interview, when I found an interactive educational website that I thought might be of particular interest either to Jude or to his students, I forwarded the link to him and received the following response:

Hope things are going well! Would be good to chat at some stage, even by e-mail! On the home front I have taken steps to go forward!!!! Regards JT

Naturally, I was interested to know what new plotline was being played out in the next chapter of Jude's story. I had been extended an invitation back into the research conversation, but I was conscious that this might raise ethical concerns. I wondered whether these concerns would prevent a continuation of our research dialogue beyond our contractual agreement, despite Jude's invitation. A quick check with my primary supervisor confirmed my intuitive conviction that "it would be a breach of trust to refuse contact now,"¹¹ and that, provided I cleared with Jude the use of any data resulting from our "chat," I was able to accept his invitation back into his story. And so, happily, I replied that I'd be pleased to continue our conversation. And Jude responded:

After our session last year I did challenge Suzanne on her dependence, with little gain. As the year progressed, with a mixture of anti-depressants, Valium and drinking, I had had enough, and decided to put forward the idea that I wanted the marriage to end. What followed was shock and horror on Suzanne's behalf. I had lived with this for years, but for Suzanne her dream had been broken. Many silly attention seeking [behaviours] over 2 weeks: "I will do anything to stay with you. I will stop drinking." [The same] old broken record! Have been going to counselling with her, if not for us to get together then at least for her to get her head around her behaviour, and [the understanding] that she has missed out on the best part of the boys and their growing up. In the past year she has become a lot more withdrawn, etc., etc.! The counselling has highlighted that we have

⁹ (D. Jean Clandinin, personal communication, January 5, 2007).

¹⁰ Contracted by the signing of the consent form by each of the participants and me.

¹¹ (M. S. Barrett, personal communication, March 7, 2006).

drifted apart and a big factor has been the breakdown in communication!

In short it took me a long time to tell Suzanne where we were at and I thought that life owes an individual more than being the support of someone who has lost their independence, and [who] was displaying such poor behaviour in front of the boys. They had lost all respect!

So now [we're] at crossroads. Two weeks ago [I was] very definite about where I wanted to be, and that was away from Suzanne, at least until all was cleared up! To now thinking she has made lots of headway – no drinking, on medication to stop, participating more in the running of the house and thinking of a partnership; that I should allow more time together, offering background support and making sure that I participate as much as S is!

Whatever the outcome there will be four stronger and better balanced people, either living together or apart!

Epilogue

At journey's end: A traveller reflects

*One's destination is never a place,
but a new way of seeing things¹*

This research journey began with my experience of the MESH Support Group Facilitator Training program in November 2002. At the end of that first 3-day workshop, I was left physically and emotionally exhausted. At the same time, I'd found the whole process to be amazingly cathartic. I'd learned a great deal about myself, about others, about relationships, and about the human condition. My life was opened to a refreshingly new way of being. I believed that the program had the potential to provide teachers with self-understanding, which is important to their professional development (Jersild, 1954, 1955). The experience caused me to puzzle over whether others' experiences of MESH in any way resembled my own. I was intrigued to know the personal and professional outcomes for teachers beyond the lived experience of the 3-day workshop I had experienced. I wanted to know whether outcomes endured.

This attempt to deepen my understanding was guided by a number of research questions. My overarching question was:

What are the enduring outcomes for teachers of their participation in a 3-day MESH professional development workshop?

In order to further interrogate this question, I framed three supporting questions:

What are teachers' reasons for attending MESH professional development?

What is their lived experience?

In what ways do teachers draw on their experience in their personal lives and professional practice?

¹ Henry Miller.

In the biographical narrative accounts constructed from the interview and observation data and their analysis, I contextualised and explored the participation, experiences and enduring outcomes of the MESH workshop for these Tasmanian teachers.

In this chapter, I turn to “the personal and the social significance” of this study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 161). I begin the chapter by summarising my learning in respect to each of the research questions, and then contemplate issues that this study has raised in terms of resonances, “tensions and paradoxes” (Wolcott, 2001, p. 125). I consider the significance of this study, contemplate ideas for further research, and reflect on the personal and professional outcomes for me of my MESH experiences. In closing, I revisit each of the seven teacher participants and provide a coda to each participant’s biographical narrative account.



Addressing the research questions

In this section, I revisit each of the research questions. Firstly, I summarise my learning concerning each of the three supporting questions, and then address the overarching question regarding the enduring outcomes of participation in the MESH PD workshop for teacher participants in this study.

Teachers’ reasons for attending

Teachers enrol in the MESH PD workshops for three key reasons: the new and changing demands on classroom teachers that have resulted in them increasingly performing a “social work” role; the extended and complex requirements of teachers in leadership and support roles; and the recognition by some schools of the need for teachers to develop increased intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness skills.

The primary reason teachers voluntarily attend a MESH workshop is their perception that, increasingly, broader social changes are resulting in students in their care needing increased levels of understanding and support. These potentially overwhelming issues affect students’ lives, and negatively impact on their capacity to undertake significant learning. Whilst these teachers want to make a difference to the lives and life chances of students, they often feel inadequately equipped to undertake this task, believing that they lack the knowledge and necessary skills to support their

students in ways that are appropriate.

For other teachers, it is the demanding nature of their leadership and support roles in schools which accounts for their MESH enrolment. Cutbacks to support funding, the closure of many specialised facilities, and the inclusion of students who are mentally, emotionally, physically and behaviourally challenged, and challenging, within regular classroom settings has the capacity to be problematic for classroom teachers. When teachers require students to receive individualised or small group support, or when they reach the limit of their ability to tolerate or deal effectively with disruptive or aggressive student behaviour, the responsibility for these “challenging” students is commonly passed on to support teachers. Additionally, extra responsibility falls to teachers in senior leadership positions, who spend significant proportions of their time “dealing” with students, liaising with parents and carers, and enlisting specialist services from support agencies.

In many schools, classroom and support teachers, as well as those in leadership positions, face the daily reality of interacting with a number of students whose personal lives impact negatively on their behaviour and learning. These issues are of concern to teachers, because of their professional and emotional commitment to their students. The “conspiracy of silence” surrounding the social work role that teachers now perform (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 168) has meant that it is largely neglected by both teacher education and inservice professional development initiatives. Consequently, teachers are frequently dealing with social and emotional issues which go far beyond their comfort zone of professional practice, and beyond the scope of issues addressed in their teacher preparation courses. Indeed, neither initial teacher education, nor years of teaching and life experience, has equipped many teachers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to work effectively to support those students described as being “at risk.” Some of these teachers are concerned that what they are doing to address students’ needs is instinctive, or intuitive, rather than necessarily being informed by relevant theory or practice. Through their MESH participation they seek to increase their capacity for understanding the social and emotional issues affecting their students, and hope to learn new skills in order to better support their students and engage them affectively.

Other teachers who enrol in MESH workshops are representatives of schools or school systems which value the program’s potential to improve teachers’ self-

understanding, and their understanding of, and sensitivity to, students and the issues that they face. Schools that have been introduced to the MESH program are convinced of its value to the personal growth of their teachers, and of the potential the program has to impact positively on teachers' relationships with their students. These schools are investing in the holistic well-being and development of their teaching staff, and the welfare of their students.

A supplementary reason for MESH participation considered by part-time or casual teachers is that this may give them a professional *edge* over others when seeking full-time or permanent employment.

Teachers' lived experience

It is impossible, in this dissertation, to convey the full emotional intensity of the lived experience of the MESH workshop. However, the biographical narrative accounts have captured participants' immediate responses to, and in-depth perceptions of, their living of the 3-day MESH experience. Here, I provide an outline of the processes experienced by participants, and exemplify their responses to these.

In the *Prologue*, I told the story of my first MESH group experience, intimating that, initially, the experiential nature of the PD can be quite confronting. Although the advertising flyer clearly identifies the "intensive" and "highly experiential" nature of the workshop (see Appendix A), many who enrol in the MESH workshop are unaware that they will become a member of a support group as part of their training to facilitate support groups for their students. Many, too, are unprepared for the intensity of the personal emotional work that support group participation entails. Although some have heard in advance from others about the deeply personal nature of the MESH group process, they believe that they can simply put their *shutters down and listen*, rather than completely involve themselves in the group process. In practice, this is unlikely. Nevertheless, despite any early concerns they may have, participants generally become familiar with and accustomed to the highly structured and repetitive format of the MESH group process.

Initially, the group facilitator/trainer models the process of self-disclosure to the group. In the *Prologue*, Nairn Walker's story is used as an exemplar of this process. In the first two groups, the reciprocal and emotional nature of the paired life story sharing – storytelling and storylistening – builds trust and connections between

group members, and trust in the group process. This trust continues to develop, and eventually a powerful emotional bond develops between group members.² This bond develops even though *you would never hand-pick half these people to be in a group with*. Indeed, participants are commonly amazed by *how BONDED you can become in 3 days with people you've never met before*.

The expectation that group members will each co-facilitate at least one support group and share a story of a challenging life situation results in group members reflecting on their lives in order to select a story that has meaning for them, and that they feel able to share. Choosing an appropriate story can be difficult and can cause some anxiety, often intensified by overnight rumination. Vivienne Deane, for example, was apprehensive about disclosing a significant story about her own sexual abuse to the group. Indeed, because of her loyalty to her husband she felt duty-bound to share her story with him before sharing even part of it with her group. Vivienne described herself as being *a fairly goal-orientated, purposeful sort of practitioner* and had enrolled with *a really clearly defined purpose*. And yet, she was *really surprised* about being *really involved, emotionally involved in other people's stories and in [her] own*.

In later group sessions, when high levels of trust exist, group members often take the opportunity to self-disclose at a deep emotional level. Sharing stories revealing deeply intimate aspects of the self can be a profoundly emotional experience for both storytellers and storylisteners alike, and during most workshops there are times when tears are shed. These very emotional storytelling experiences are typically described as *cathartic*. However, such public displays of deep emotion can be difficult for some group participants. Naomi Cameron, for example, struggled with the intensity of her emotions on the third day of the workshop, when her self-realisations came as a *slap in the face*. She *was almost out the door*, in order to avoid crying in front of other group members. Yet, despite the deep sadness evoked by some stories, participants also share humorous incidents and these provide some light relief; there are *quite a few good high points* during the workshops.

Sometimes, group members share a genuinely troubling story for the first time. Jude Tomasz's story of his wife's alcohol dependence is one example. Telling these "secret

² Listeners often feel a strong connection to group members whose stories they connect with on an emotional level, although storytellers may never know of, or feel, this connection to their listeners. That is, unless the connection is reciprocated, as happened for Naomi Cameron and Vivienne Deane in their stories of sexual assault.

stories” may be fraught with fear, and the risk of rejection, as work roles and societal restrictions tend to limit how much people can tell of themselves (Jourard, 1979; Kenyon & Randall, 1997). Indeed, for Jude, who had experienced a lack of trust in a previous workplace, sharing his intensely personal story with five colleagues present was a courageous act (Shabatay, 1991).³ But Jude, trusting *that everything [shared within the group] was purely confidential*, had decided that it was finally time to *let [his story] loose*. Kym Oliver suggested that this confidence in the other group members *releases something inside of you*. For Jude, releasing his story began *the mending process*.

While it is the emotional experience of the support group process that often leaves the most vivid and lasting impression in the memories of MESH participants, experiencing the information sessions is also very valuable. *And you couldn't say which was better – the group work or the lectures – 'cos they both go together*. These sessions provide participants with knowledge about contemporary societal issues: *a bit of an immersion into how society is operating in this sort of complex world*. Yet, rather than information flow being solely one-way, time is allowed for participants to share their knowledge and experience in “meaningful conversations” with their colleagues (Barone, 1992, p. 142). In this way, participants draw strength from each other, and are empowered to recognise the expertise that they have acquired whilst working with a diverse range of marginalised students, and in school contexts often described as “difficult.”

In combination, the support group process and information sessions act to normalise participants' experiences, and allow them to feel that they are not alone in regularly being confronted by stressful situations in both their personal and professional lives.

All seven teacher participants in this study experienced the program differently, depending on their personal and professional experiences and needs, their level of engagement with the program, and their willingness to share stories – their own and those of others. Regardless of these differences, all participants described their experiences in very positive terms, and believed that they benefited both personally and professionally as a result of their “highly experiential” 3-day experience.

Teachers' drawing on their experience

The biographical narrative accounts demonstrate that, for the seven teacher

³ Attending a MESH workshop as part of a collegial group provides for a different type of experience, in terms of challenges and benefits. These differences are not fully explored in this dissertation.

participants in this study, experiences in the MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops became a resource that was drawn on both personally and professionally long after their 3-day experience ended. Indeed, their MESH experiences provided *a reference point for both ... personal and professional life*.

Personal

Activities that involved raising to consciousness and sharing stories detailing critical incidents and significant events caused participants to reflect on the meaning of these stories. By doing so, they became more self-aware, and began to recognise some of the patterns inherent in their behaviours and how these affected their self-expression and interpersonal relationships. The recognition that these patterns existed brought about *a turning point* beyond which participants were able to contemplate and then effect changes in their personal lives. These changes allowed them to realise the benefits that ensued from their implementation. Jude Tomasz, for example, realised that he had been enabling his wife's alcohol addiction. Consequently, he chose to cease this behaviour, and eventually sought family counselling.

A combination of storytelling and stream-of-consciousness writing about experiences allowed participants to more readily accept critical incidents in their pasts, come to new understandings, and then move forward in their lives. Kath Rivers' in-group experiences, for example, allowed her to *really clarify [her] feelings* about her relationship with her ex-husband. Later, as a result of her catharsis, she was more able to accept further unfortunate news about his health. Kym Oliver lost her fear of flying, her debilitating panic attacks ceased, and she found a new love of travel.

Participants were able to decrease their feelings of guilt, forgive themselves and become more self-accepting. Kym Oliver, for example, was able to reconcile herself to some of the guilt she had felt over her early parenting of her step-children. Moreover, she realised the importance of being able to forgive not only others in her life, but, perhaps more importantly, to forgive herself. Kym's new self-acceptance allowed her to become less self-critical, gain self-confidence, and overcome her concerns about what others might think of her.

The feedback sessions, particularly that in the closing group, were *powerful* and left a lasting, positive impression on a number of participants in this study. In private moments, well after the end of their 3-day experience, participants found themselves

drawn back to read, and gain comfort from, their colleagues' comments about them. *I often sort of look at that and think, ... "That's right. They said I was this or that or...."* Kym Oliver's comment about this feedback process, however, sheds light on the transformative nature of the MESH experience as a whole: *What people said to me there, people've been saying to me for a long time, but there I believed it. And I knew it wasn't just lip service. I believed it because I learnt to believe it about my self too.*

The processes of storylistening and reflection prompted participants' increased awareness and better understanding of others, their ways of being, and *about why people are the way they are*. They recognised the important influence of biography, especially the long-term influence exerted by childhood experiences on *how you grow up*. These understandings enabled participants to suspend their judgment of others, because *you never know what's underneath all that.... There's a reason why they're like it*. Participants were able to gain insight into the human condition and to understand *that we are all connected, by not necessarily the same experiences, but the same sort of life experiences – we all have problems, we all have to get through things, we all have stages in our life that are very difficult, and we all have issues.*

Professional

The MESH experience acted to affirm or validate teacher participants' professional ways of being. For example, Kym Oliver, whose preferred way of being included sharing aspects of her life with students, had the aptness of her practice affirmed, relieving her of lingering doubts fuelled by her colleagues' cautions and criticisms. She gained confidence in her teaching style and in her belief that the relationship she enjoys with students is appropriate, and important to them. Naomi Cameron's school social worker's acceptance of her post-MESH interpretation of a student's behaviour allowed her to feel *a bit more confident*. In other ways, too, MESH participation *confirmed a lot of things that [she had] sort of been doing anyway*. Kath Rivers began to appreciate that her teachers' emotional and psychological limitations impacted on their ability to both understand and empathise with students, but reinforced her belief that students' needs were paramount.

The MESH workshops developed teacher participants' skills and gave them strategies to improve their interactions with students, which resulted in a variety of noteworthy changes to their practice. Kym Oliver, for example, who had been *the biggest believer in suspension* and *the first to go, "Get 'em out!"* when students misbehaved in

class, came to understand that students “act out” for a reason, and decided that, instead of punishment and suspension, *We’ve gotta go further. We’ve gotta do more.* Vivienne Deane also drew on understandings she had gained and began to act as a mirror to students, describing to them the physical manifestations of their emotions in order for them to begin to recognise these themselves. Patrick Jamieson discovered that small incidents he would previously have overlooked took on greater significance, and he treated students with more compassion as a result. Kym Oliver and Jude Tomasz became *a bit more vigilant*, looking beyond students’ exterior presentation. Geoff Murray applied what he had learned about defences and the impact that they have on student behaviour in making an assessment of a “difficult” student.

Although not all of the seven teachers who participated in this study chose, or were able, to facilitate school-based student support groups, groups were implemented in two schools as a direct result of the MESH experiences of the seven teacher participants in this study. Kath Rivers’ new understanding of the value of support groups caused her to implement changes to the Oceanview High School timetable in order to allow Kym Oliver to facilitate groups. Kath had the support of school staff in making these changes, because their personal experience of the whole-staff MESH PD had led them to value the process. The support groups that Kym facilitated were popular with students, and, she believed, beneficial to her relationships with them. Vivienne Deane trialled a support group with students at Cherryvale Primary School, and had planned to implement more groups before her sudden, unanticipated transfer to Meadowbank Primary School.

The teacher participants in this study became more understanding of, and less quick to judge, their colleagues, students and others. The MESH experience allowed Patrick Jamieson to realise that he didn’t know his colleagues as well as he had thought; they were more complex than he’d previously realised. His new knowledge made it easier for him to work with them, because *you interact better with people that you really understand.* Vivienne Deane became *far more up-front with people*, and more willing to raise issues with her staff when she felt that they needed her support. Kim Oliver’s experience broke down long-standing prejudices about the degree to which social class can be useful as an indicator of need, and made her aware that most people are confronted with difficult issues at some stage in their lives.

From personal to professional

Participants gave a number of examples of the ways in which they were able to draw on their personal experiences in order to inform practices in their professional lives. Naomi Cameron, for example, realised that she had been *keeping a lid on [things]*. ... *when you think about it in a school context, "Whoa!" How many kids are out there and keeping a lid on things? That's why they boil over and they get SO angry, so quickly, over NOTHING, and they've got all these other issues, and that's what happens; it overflows every now and then.* Patrick Jamieson's personal appreciation of the closing ceremony and certificates prompted him to incorporate these into his work with tutor groups, causing his students to realise that *they'd been on quite a path, a journey, during the year*. He also displayed a sample certificate on the wall of his classroom, planting *a bit of a seed* so that students might think about and value their contributions to the group throughout the school year.

Enduring outcomes

When first contemplating this study, I believed that, due to the aim of the MESH PD program, an ideal outcome of teacher participation would be that teachers would return to their schools and facilitate support groups for their students. In my naivety, I believed that this outcome might be indicative of the success of the program. As a result of this research project, however, I have found that there are other profound outcomes which do have the capacity to endure in the personal and professional lives of individual participants.

I suggest that some of the most noteworthy outcomes for these participants occurred at a deeply personal level. Rich descriptions of these outcomes are embedded in the narrative accounts that participants gave of their experiences. That those outcomes were often profoundly personal is appropriate, for Dewey (1938) recognised that personal experience is a powerful means of education. Rogers (1969) argues that for any such learning to be of *lasting* significance it must engage the learner's *genuine self*, be personally relevant and of interest to the learner, and involve both cognition and affect. This study's data and their analysis, re-presented in the biographical narrative accounts, and summarised in the previous sections of this chapter, illustrate that the unique nature of the 3-day MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshop experience does engage participants at the deep level of the self. This PD program provides content that is undoubtedly germane to the personal and professional lives of participants, engaging participants at a deep level, both cognitively and affectively.

I suggest that it is for reasons such as these that participants' MESH experiences were so personally and professionally transformative.



Contemplations

The stories re-presented in the seven biographical narrative accounts trouble some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the role that teachers perform in contemporary classrooms, and about the teacher-as-person. In this section, I discuss the ways in which the findings of this study resonate with the literature discussed in Chapter Three, and then identify and examine some tensions and paradoxes which have become apparent to me during the course of this inquiry.

Resonances

The teachers' "social work" role

It is clear from my review of the extant literature that schools are including increasing numbers of students who have high support needs, and that, consequently, teachers in contemporary classrooms are facing "growing social work responsibilities" (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 181). This study supports the view that these responsibilities concern a number of teachers both professionally, and affectively – at the level of the person (Hargreaves, 1997a). Unfortunately, despite the number of personal and social issues affecting their students, teachers receive little, if any, instruction in supporting students' needs, beyond those related to their academic learning. It is abundantly clear that, if governments and educational systems hope to meet society's ongoing requirements in terms of improved outcomes for all students, calls for the true nature of the teacher's social work role to be "acknowledged by policy makers and resourced adequately" (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 181; see also Nias, 1998) need to be addressed. The resources provided – in terms of increased support services, pre-service and in-service PD – need to be appropriate to the individual needs and concerns of students, their teachers, and their school communities.

Teachers' mental health and well-being

Teaching is an intensely emotional and stressful occupation (Bullough et al., 2006; Chakravorty, 1989; Cockburn, 1996; Cole & Walker, 1989; Guglielmi & Tatrow,

1998; Hargreaves, 1997a; Jersild, 1955; Nias, 1989a; W. A. Rogers, 1992; Talmor et al., 2005; Troman, 2000; Troman & Woods, 2001; Woods, 1989). Additionally, the data support the view that, beyond the stress they encounter as professionals, some teachers are also coping with a range of psychological stressors in their personal lives, sometimes without the internal resources or external support they need to effectively manage these. Educational systems in Tasmania generally provide limited free counselling support for staff. However, there exists in Australia a dominant cultural attitude which views suffering stress-related illness and seeking professional psychological support as signs of personal weakness (W. A. Rogers, 1992). This negative attitude may limit the number of teachers who avail themselves of support, despite high levels of need. By the time teachers realise their need for professional help, they are often overwhelmed or suffering “burn out” (Troman & Woods, 2001). Acknowledging unhealthy levels of stress and seeking support are, however, a positive step towards healing and growth, and need to be more widely recognised as such.

Support groups have the capacity to assist group members to cope with a variety of different life issues, and can offer their members a number of benefits in terms of “psychological support” (Nichols & Jenkinson, 2006, p. 8). Staff support groups are known to be an effective way for professionals working in emotionally demanding fields to address the high stresses that their work entails, and can “make an important contribution to the well-being of staff” (Nichols & Jenkinson, 2006, pp. 2–3). One reason teacher participants in this study enrolled in MESH PD was their search for effective ways to support their students’ needs. As a result of their care and commitment to their students’ welfare, teachers inadvertently found themselves participating in a collegial support group. Thus, they found a safe place in which to share their “secret stories,” and this resulted in unexpected psychological and collegial support that was valuable, both personally and professionally. For educational institutions keen to support the mental health and well-being of staff, collegial support groups may provide one solution that is effective in terms of positive personal and professional outcomes, as well as cost.

Teacher biography

People are influenced by a remarkably complex combination of factors, including genetic inheritance, parents’ personalities and parenting styles, culture, social class,

religious instruction, school experiences, travel, friendship and reference groups, significant and intimate relationships, and critical life incidents. Surely, there can be no denying the assertion that “life experiences influence the sorts of teachers people become” (Sikes, 1992, p. 39; see also Goodson, 1992d; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; J. G. Knowles, 1992; Nias, 1989a). It is clear that teachers draw extensively on their biographies, and that biographical factors influence teachers’ personal lives and professional practices (Acker, 1988; Brookfield, 1995; Goodson, 1992d; Nias, 1989a; Polkinghorne, 1995; Yero, 2002). Patently, the range and extent of biographical influence reported in the accounts of the seven teacher participants in this study support this view.

Importantly, however, the personal and professional understandings that result from life’s experiences are not the exclusive privilege of age. Rather, it is the depth and breadth of experience of “the life lived” that enriches people’s understandings. Indeed, teachers’ understandings are not only informed by their life experiences, but also *limited* by these very experiences, or lack of them.

The teacher participants’ biographical narrative accounts trouble the traditional societal perception that teachers in this culture are, generally, privileged with a “nice,” or “comfortable,” middle-class life. The accounts demonstrate that these teachers bring a range of understandings to their role, based on their diverse experiences of life. However, exposure to their colleagues’ stories, and to the expression of emotion that accompanied their colleagues’ storytelling, gave these teachers unprecedented and privileged access to understandings far beyond those developed from their own life experiences. And, as a result, they became more understanding of their colleagues, and more prepared to suspend judgment of them. Moreover, they were also prepared to transfer their new understandings to others, beyond those in their immediate support group.

The difficulty that some teachers experience in recognising and identifying the various effects of students’ life experiences, such as parental addiction, family dysfunction, and various forms of abuse (Knight et al., 1992, p. 367; Meister, 2000a; Paton, 1999; Skinner, 1999), and perceiving which students may be “at risk” (Skinner, 1999), is possibly a direct result of these teachers’ personal lack of experience of such issues. Indeed, the circumstances of some students’ lives are exceptionally tragic, falling so far outside most people’s experiences and imaginings

that they are, unsurprisingly, inconceivable (see, for example, Hayden, 1980; Pelzer, 1995, 1997, 2004).

The findings of this study support the view that exposure to others' narratives of experience has the potential to extend and enrich teachers' understandings of circumstances beyond their own lived experience. Consequently, while it is crucial that pre-service and in-service teachers explore and interrogate their own biographies and their influence on practice,⁴ it is clear that listening to, or alternatively reading, others' autobiographical accounts of troubling childhood and life experiences,⁵ may offer a range of other constructive outcomes that may be beneficial to teachers, and to extending their understanding and support of their students, and each other.

Tensions and paradoxes

SAPs in a Tasmanian context

The literature reporting on Student Assistance Programs (SAPs) in US studies,⁶ supports a comprehensive state, district, or school-wide program in which teams of professionals work together to identify, report on, and provide effective intervention for students at-risk of academic or life failure. Indeed, Anderson has said that successful SAPs "are never the result of an individual, solitary effort. Rather, a program consists of a team of individuals – a group united by a common goal and responsibility" (1989, pp. 7–8).

In Tasmania, there is no legislation or infrastructure that supports the type of state, district or whole-school approach to programs like SAPs which are mandated and evidenced in schools in the US. Indeed, it is often the case that individual teachers attend the MESH PD as a matter of personal choice, and therefore without the explicit support of their school leadership team, or school system. Consequently, most Tasmanian teachers do not have the benefit of a shared, collegial experience.⁷ Indeed, individual teachers may return to their classrooms and schools after a

⁴ Particularly in relation to the process of transference (see p. 63).

⁵ I highly recommend the autobiographical chronicles of the life of Dave Pelzer: *A child called "It": One child's courage to survive* (1995), *The lost boy: A foster child's search for the love of a family* (1997), *The privilege of youth: A teenager's story* (2004), and *A man named Dave: A story of triumph and forgiveness* (2000). Additionally, Torey Hayden's *One Child* (1980) gives the author-teacher's perspective of her relationship with a very troubled, abused child in her class.

⁶ Regardless of which model of SAP is the subject of study.

personally and professionally transformative experience, and attempts that they make to explain⁸ or implement the program may not be understood or supported by senior staff, teacher colleagues and specialist support staff⁹ unfamiliar with the program or its benefits. Despite their good intentions, without leadership support and team infrastructure, these teachers may find it difficult to successfully implement effective support groups (Anderson, 1989).

Whilst this study found that there were profound, positive personal and professional outcomes for the seven Tasmanian teacher participants, many of which may impact either directly or indirectly on their students' experiences of education, I suggest that the current lack of supportive legislation, and/or infrastructure within Tasmanian schools, does limit the potential effectiveness of the program. Therefore, it would be preferable if schools that enrol teachers in the MESH PD consider fully supporting the implementation of a MESH support group program in order to maximise the potential benefits from their expenditure, for teachers and students alike. To do this would require that schools enrol more than one teacher,¹⁰ and be prepared to make changes to infrastructure that would enable students who need additional support to attend a group. Consequently, while the decision to implement support groups in schools represents a significant commitment to student welfare, it is not one to be taken lightly (Anderson, 1989). Realistically, however, this recommendation may be difficult to implement, as the true nature of the MESH PD is not often known to teachers or their school leadership prior to their enrolment in it.

Unrealisable expectations

Whilst the facilitation of support groups by "unqualified" persons may be controversial (Anderson, 1989; Nichols & Jenkinson, 2006), sensitive people working within the caring professions are quite capable of facilitating these groups (Nichols & Jenkinson, 2006). Indeed, teachers are well-placed to act as support group facilitators, due to the intimate nature of the teacher-student relationship (Office of

⁷ Four of the seven participants in this study experienced MESH with one or more colleagues present. In my 5-year experience, this is unusual and does not represent the experience of most participants.

⁸ In some schools, there is an expectation that teachers who attend PD workshops report their experiences to their colleagues during staff meetings, as a means of disseminating information more widely throughout schools.

⁹ Social workers, guidance officers, and so on.

¹⁰ In Tasmania, individual schools bear the cost of teacher PD. To fund one teacher's attendance at a 3-day MESH workshop costs in excess of AU\$1,000, if calculations include the enrolment fee, and a relief (or supply) teacher's salary, making this PD relatively expensive.

Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2001).

Pragmatically speaking, MESH PD provides teachers with an appropriate support group model, and personal experience of participation in the support group process. In addition, however, teachers need to possess well-developed intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, be reflexive, and open to sharing aspects of their personal lives, in order to ensure effective support group facilitation for students. Indeed, a number of factors need to be taken into account in any decision concerning an individual teacher's suitability for a group facilitation role, beyond their obvious desire to provide supplementary support to their students.

In regard to the aims of the MESH program – to prepare teachers to facilitate support groups for students deemed to be “at risk” – it is worth revisiting Jersild's contention (1955) that teachers need to be engaged in endeavours to increase their self-understanding and self-acceptance before they can help their students to realise their own potential in these areas. Furthermore, the psychological health and emotional stability of facilitators is crucial to their effectiveness as support group facilitators. As previously discussed, many teachers are already experiencing considerable psychological stress, resulting from demands in both their personal and professional lives. To expect teachers who are themselves “at risk” to support others is both unrealistic and inadvisable, especially given the lack of supportive infrastructure in Tasmanian schools. Certainly, teachers who do choose to facilitate groups may be left largely unsupported in their endeavours, which is far from ideal. Importantly, too, teachers must be prepared to enter into a privileged, supportive relationship with students. Consequently, any expectation on the part of school leaders that all teachers who engage in MESH PD can effectively facilitate student support groups is unrealisable.

Whether or not teachers actually draw on their MESH experiences to facilitate student support groups, their experiences endowed the seven teacher participants in this study with altered perceptions of themselves and others, and improved understandings of, and relationships with, colleagues, family members, and students in their care. These teachers clearly believed the MESH PD to be a uniquely valuable experience, both personally and professionally.

Significance and potential contribution of the study

No previous studies have reported on the outcomes for teacher participants in a SAP/MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshop. Hence, this study, which reports on the enduring personal and professional outcomes of teacher participants' experiences of this PD workshop, is theoretically significant in that it "breaks new ground," opening to inspection this previously unexplored area of teachers' personal and professional development experiences.

Further theoretical significance lies in this study's illumination of the powerful influence that biographical factors exert on the ways in which teachers' enact their professional work lives. There is extensive recognition and acknowledgement of the crucial importance of biography to teaching practice (Ayers, 1989; Barone, 1987; Britzman, 1986; Davies & Adams, 2000; Erkkila, 2001; Goodson, 1992d, 1997; Krall, 1988; Mayfarth, 1954; Nias, 1989b; Nieto, 2003; Schempp et al., 1999; S. Weiss, 2002a, 2002b). This study's biographical narrative accounts provide a unique and deeply intimate view of the lives of seven Tasmanian teachers, the experiences and critical incidents that have shaped their worldviews, and the extent to which these teachers draw on their personal biographical experiences to inform their professional practices.

This study also has methodological significance. The deep insights into teachers' lives, referred to above, were made possibly by a unique combination of narrative inquiry methodology and the advantageous use of the research context/site, in which story was a naturally-occurring phenomenon. Engaging myself as a full participant-observer in the support group process experienced by the teacher participants in this study provided unprecedented access to the depths of their emotional engagement with the support group process, and allowed me to rapidly move beyond the "normal" researcher-participant relationship. Many of the deeply personal insights into these seven teachers' lives, re-presented in the biographical narrative accounts, would not have been possible without this methodological approach.

This study is also personally significant. The findings of this study validate my belief that the work that I do with Nairn Walker is personally and professionally important to teachers. Certainly, the biographical narrative accounts demonstrate that this work has ongoing significance in the lives of the seven MESH Support Group Facilitator Training teacher participants in this study. Intrinsically, this knowledge is very

rewarding.

Further research

Participants in this study who attended a MESH workshop as part of a collegial group were provided with a different type of experience – both in terms of the challenges they faced, and the long-term collegial benefits that could ensue – than those participants who experienced the program as a sole school representative. It was not possible, within the scope of this dissertation, to fully explore these differences. Further research could investigate the challenges, benefits, and enduring outcomes of a collegial or whole-staff SAP/MESH PD using a similar methodology to that employed in this study.

Research on the extent to which Tasmanian teachers fulfil a social work role, and how adequately prepared they feel to work effectively to support their students' personal, social and emotional needs, might inform policy makers, educational authorities and teacher educators about the skills and understandings teachers need to work effectively in this much-neglected area of their work. Such research may break the existing “conspiracy of silence” regarding this important and often unrecognised role (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002, p. 168).

Further studies could investigate the outcomes of students' participation in teacher-facilitated SAP/MESH support groups in a Tasmanian school context, using a range of qualitative and quantitative indicators.



Personal reflection on my journey

This dissertation began with a story about my first MESH experience, and so, in nearing its end, it seems appropriate that I explore some of the ways in which that experience, and the many others that have followed, have changed me both personally and professionally. Some of my experience is reflected in the experiences of my teacher participants.

Personal outcomes

My first MESH experience led me to understand myself more fully, and to realise the effect of my biography on my self. Subsequent experiences have acted to deepen my

self-understanding.

Since childhood, there have been many times when I haven't said what I thought, or how I felt. Most of the time, I tended to keep my thoughts, feelings and emotions suppressed, like Naomi Cameron and Jude Tomasz believing that self-suppression was somehow preferable to self-expression and the attendant risk of confrontation.¹¹ My initial MESH experience was cathartic. The release of years of unexpressed emotion, and the subsequent physical and emotional relief I felt, led me to believe that expression of emotion is a much healthier option for me to pursue. In practice, this doesn't always come easily. However, I now know and understand my self, my emotions, and my actions at a much deeper level than I did prior to my engagement with MESH. Habitually, now, when appropriate, I use active, first-person speech, because I recognise that this empowers me to claim ownership of my feelings, as well as my behaviours. I'm now also more assertive, and more prepared to publically stand up for myself, others, and causes I believe in. Like some others, I've learned that it's okay to say "no," and I've become more successful at doing this.¹²

Once I had enrolled at university as an undergraduate student, I had high expectations of myself. However, even before that, I felt guilty when I failed to live up to either my own or (my beliefs about) others' expectations of me. Surprisingly, it wasn't until during my *ninth* MESH experience that it suddenly occurred to me that my feelings of guilt stemmed from the number of rules I was trying to live my life by. Rules that began: "I should ..." and "I must" I'm now working at being less rule-bound, and am becoming more forgiving of myself.

After my first experience of a MESH family sculpture role-play, I became aware of the effect of my then obsessive study habits on my self, my family and our healthy functioning as a social unit. I came to realise that I had thrown myself into my studies and driven myself to strive for quite an unrealisable level of perfection. Consequently, I'd neglected other things in my life, and had put a huge strain on my mental health, my family, and on our relationships, which had all suffered as a result. My MESH experiences have led me to understand that my drive to achieve was a form of addiction,¹³ and a defense that I had developed in order to protect myself from feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-esteem, and shame. I also came to

¹¹ Like Naomi and Jude, I had this behaviour modeled for me as a child.

¹² However, I realise that, in any form of relationship, being prepared to compromise is essential.

¹³ Akin to workaholism.

understand that my behaviour was hypocritical, because I was always far more accepting of other people's imperfections than I was of my own. I've come to understand that if I can allow other people their imperfections I can at least allow myself the same latitude. And, this new acceptance of my human imperfection brings with it the freedom for me to simply be me. Cumulatively, these understandings have had repercussions in my family life. We have grown in our understanding of each other's needs, and achieved a healthier functionality.

I've also learnt from MESH that what I *do* isn't who I *am*. True, what I do is a part of who I am, but not all. I understand, now, that it's not healthy to invest too much of my self in any one aspect of my life. So, I've begun to diversify my interests, and my life feels more balanced as a result.¹⁴ I plan to maintain this healthier approach to life.

Something else that I've come to understand as a result of my many amazing MESH experiences is the power of story. Furthermore, my engagement with the substantive literature that has informed my research has helped me to theorise and deepen my knowledge of narrative, its uses and the exceptional potential it has to benefit both storytellers and storylisteners alike. Stories, both "real" and fictional, have the power to enter into human understanding vicariously, and have the potential to transform that understanding. They have certainly transformed mine.

For me, telling self stories is a freedom that has come with practice. The more I have involved myself in the group process of self-disclosure the more I have felt free to reflect on and talk about aspects of my life both inside and outside the support group process.¹⁵ By observing others, and listening to their stories, I've developed a belief that people's past experiences manifest themselves physically, as well as psychologically. I'm now more willing to listen to others' self stories, and often ponder their meaning for the storytellers and for life more generally. I feel truly honoured to have shared the stories of the participants in the many support groups I've attended. Indeed, I believe that the group members' stories are their legacy – they stay with me, and I do see things differently because of them. It is my hope that the stories I have re-told herein may affect others in a similar way. In the words of Robert Coles, "Their story, yours, mine – it's what we all carry with us on this trip we

¹⁴ I admit that this hasn't always been easy while undertaking doctoral study. However, before beginning this project, I made a conscious decision, and have since invested conscious effort, to ensure that I maintain a healthier balance in my life than I did during my years of undergraduate/Honours study.

¹⁵ Although I admit to experiencing feelings of trepidation prior to facilitating any new support group.

take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them” (1989, p. 30).

I firmly believe that “stories lived and told educate the self and others” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). My deliberate use of the word “shared,” rather than “told,” in the title of this dissertation, however, recognises the value I attribute to reciprocity – storytelling *and* storylistening – in the learning that can come from stories. This reciprocity is central to the degree of learning that derives from sharing “secret stories” in a trusting environment such as that created in the MESH support group process.

Professional outcomes

My original fascination with the 3-day MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshop in 2002, and my subsequent involvement in this study, led to my deeper engagement with support groups and their facilitation. My group facilitation role in the MESH training workshops with Nairn Walker is sporadic but ongoing. Furthermore, two former MESH participants and I regularly voluntarily facilitate 8-week community support groups, which we call “Real-Chat.” We have also facilitated support groups for the “Befrienders” of the TimeOut House,¹⁶ providing support for these community volunteers who work with young adults at risk of suicide. My involvement in training people in the skills of group facilitation, and in facilitating community support groups, has added extra depth and richness to my life.

When I first sought out MESH training, I did so because at that time it was my goal “to be the best teacher I can be.” Now, as a qualified teacher, I do not teach. In truth, I no longer see myself as a teacher. Instead of teaching, amongst the numerous other things that I now do with my life, I co-facilitate training and community support groups. Whilst I know that I’m successful in this role, I have enjoyed my immersion in the research literature and intend to continue my reading in order to deepen my theoretical understanding of people, their issues, and the potential of story.

My first MESH experience made a difference to my life, and to how I have

¹⁶ The TimeOut Project is a suicide and self-harm prevention initiative. Befrienders are volunteers who have been trained to support young people who are at risk of suicide. The TimeOut House provides supported weekend accommodation for up to 48 hours. Information on the TimeOut Project is available from <http://timeout.tasmania.net.au/>.

experienced life since that time. In undertaking this research, I followed a “hunch” that these workshops had the potential to make a powerful and important difference to the lives of teachers, their understanding of themselves and others. This study has shown that there are, indeed, profound outcomes for teacher participants in MESH PD workshops; outcomes which influence teachers’ personal and professional lives and endure well beyond the 3-day lived experience of the program.

And, for me, that’s very satisfying – personally and professionally.

Professionally speaking, I’m not really sure what my future holds. I do know, however, that I want to continue to work with people. And their stories.



Footprints on the landscape

I set out on a journey to discover the enduring personal and professional outcomes for teachers following their attendance at a 3-day MESH professional development workshop.

Returning to the field and presenting the biographical narrative accounts to my teacher participants was an affirming experience for me as a beginning researcher. Not only did my participants welcome me back, but they generally read their stories with interest, and commented positively about their experience of participating in my study. Furthermore, they were keen to bring me up-to-date on what had happened in their lives since their role in the data generation process ended. I could not have wished for more.



Kath Rivers, in her leadership role in the department, has missed her daily contact with students, as well as the familiar, repetitive, three-term rhythm of the classroom – a rhythm she’s felt since she was 6 years old. Instead of working with teachers to improve their teaching, she is now working with principals and stakeholder groups to improve schools. Since her two MESH workshop experiences, Kath is even more convinced that teachers and principals need to reflect upon their values and beliefs and that they need to understand themselves through reflection before change can occur in their practice.

Kym Oliver continues to work at Oceanview High School. Her new principal has

supported the program that Kath Rivers put in place, and Kym is passionate about the student support groups that she facilitates. Her son, Liam, has left home and is working, and Kym is coping well with his absence. She has recently travelled again, and is planning to travel more often in the future. She believes that she has grown in self-esteem and confidence since taking part in the MESH program and in this study.

Geoff Murray has had a change in financial circumstances, and he no longer needs to work as a relief teacher. He spends every morning in a local high school working at what he loves most – providing support to Aboriginal students. He's been spending his afternoons landscaping his garden, incorporating slate paths and rock walls into his design, and its splendour is a credit to his hard work and dedication.

Naomi and Peter Cameron separated in September 2007. Naomi has stayed in the family home with the children. Peter sees his children on most days as he takes them to and from school. Naomi believes her children hardly seem to have noticed their changed family circumstances. She is enjoying teaching full-time in a class of her own at Abbey Road Primary School. Naomi no longer needs antidepressant medication, and is feeling well and happy. Since separating from Peter, she has begun a relationship with someone she has known as a colleague and friend for several years. She was eager to report to me that her new companion's personality is totally different to those of Peter and her first husband. She's finding joy in spending time with someone she describes as having emotional intelligence.

Patrick Jamieson continues to teach at Clovelly School. He has experienced some personally difficult times since his participation in the data generation phase of this study. As a result, his appreciation for the work of doctors, social workers and psychiatrists has grown appreciably.

Vivienne Deane, at the beginning of third term in 2007, was asked to be acting principal at a larger school with enrolments of approximately 150 students, 25 minutes closer to her home. She is enjoying her new role, particularly because she is working with the best school staff she has experienced to date. She is keeping herself busy, as always. Her son, Leigh, is studying overseas on exchange. Vivienne, her husband and daughter are planning a holiday to visit Leigh, and an exchange student the family previously hosted.

Jude Tomasz is still teaching at Clovelly School after 5 years – the longest he has worked in one role. He has taken on responsibility for designing a new course which

draws on his engineering background and strengths. The counselling that he and Suzanne sought has helped them to greatly improve their relationships with each other, and their family. Jude believes that Suzanne is now more aware of the effect of her alcohol consumption on her family, and she has taken steps to control her drinking. Jude is feeling very positive about their future together.



We enter the research field “(politely) intruding on people in the course of living real lives” (Josselson, 2007, p. 538). We get a snapshot of people’s lives for the time that we travel with them in their stories. When we leave the field, their stories stay with us, but continue without us. In our bumping up against their stories, though, we change the plotlines (D. Jean Clandinin, personal communication, January 4, 2007). As researchers – as people – no matter how carefully we tread, we leave our footprints on the landscapes of other people’s lives.

My participants graciously chose to accept my invitation into this study, and generously allowed me to enter their storied lives. I am richer today because of their acceptance, and for that I thank them. I hope that I have done their stories the justice they deserve.

Addendum

The Invitation

It doesn't interest me *what* you do for a living.
I want to know *what* you ache for
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me *how* old you are.
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool
for love
for your dream
for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me *what* planets are squaring your moon...
I want to know if you have touched the centre of your own sorrow
if you have been opened by life's betrayals
or have become shrivelled and closed
from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain
mine or your own
without moving to hide it
or fade it
or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy
mine or your own
if you can dance with wildness
and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes
without cautioning us to
be careful
be realistic
remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me
is true.
I want to know if you can
disappoint another
to be true to yourself.

If you can bear the accusation of betrayal
and not betray your own soul.

If you can be faithless
and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see Beauty
even when it is not pretty
every day.

And if you can source your own life
from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure
yours and mine
and still stand at the edge of the lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon,
"Yes"

It doesn't interest me
to know where you live or how much money you have.

I want to know if you can get up
after the night of grief and despair
weary and bruised to the bone
and do what needs to be done
to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know
or how you came to be here.

I want to know if you will stand
in the centre of the fire
with me
and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom
you have studied.

I want to know what sustains you
from the inside
when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone
with yourself
and if you truly like the company you keep
in the empty moments.

by Oriah Mountain Dreamer

PART II

The making of the dissertation

Methods

Mapping the journey: A path navigated across a storied landscape

*All journeys have secret destinations
of which the traveler is unaware¹*

The purpose of this study has been to understand the lived experience and identify the enduring outcomes of teacher participants' engagement in a 3-day professional development (PD) workshop known as MESH Support Group Facilitator Training. My interest in understanding the experiences of participants led me to adopt narrative inquiry as my methodology. I lived alongside the workshop facilitator and each of the seven key teacher participants in this study, 3-days-at-a-time during MESH workshops, and continued my engagement with them a year later.

In planning this study, methodological decisions were guided by my beliefs about “what can be known and ... the relationship of the knower to what is to be known” (my epistemology), and “the nature of reality” (my ontology) (Hatch, 2002, p. 11). Consequently, the unpacking of these beliefs is essential to any meaningful appraisal of the research project (Hatch, 2002, p. 12; Mantzoukas, 2004, p. 1003), because they inevitably shape the study in numerous ways, both conscious and unconscious (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110; Toma, 2000, p. 178). Therefore, I weave the threads of my epistemological and ontological positioning throughout this chapter. Additionally, I explore “how knowledge is gained” (Hatch, 2002, p. 11) through the methodological approach of narrative inquiry. I also describe the methods used during the generation of the data, their analysis and re-presentation within this research text as biographical narrative accounts; and the decision-making processes I employed to meet the aims and intentions of this study. This chapter concludes with a discussion of issues such

¹ Martin Buber

as my role as researcher; privacy, confidentiality and anonymity; and the criteria by which the trustworthiness of this research may be evaluated.



Theoretical perspective

This qualitative study is located in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. My approach to research, then, is one in which knowledge is considered to be a subjective “human construction” (Hatch, 2002, p. 13). As a constructivist researcher, I understand that knowledge is socially constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). I recognise that researchers and participants, in their dialogic interaction throughout the research process, co-construct their own and shared meanings (Mishler, 1986). As a constructivist, I also recognise that multiple realities exist (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Bruner, 1986; Hatch, 2002, p. 15; Polkinghorne, 1988), and I understand that these realities are “inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). However, the view from any vantage point is, necessarily, always filtered through the lens of the social world to which the individual belongs (Bruner, 1986, pp. 122, 127; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

The next section clarifies the ways in which a narrative inquiry methodology fits with my constructivist assumptions, and why this methodology is appropriate as a means for studying this research topic (Hatch, 2002, p. 39).



Narrative inquiry

As an epistemological approach, narrative inquiry seeks to understand human subjective experience by making people’s stories a central focus of research (Clandinin, 2006, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Indeed, Clandinin and Connelly have conceptualised narrative inquiry as:

a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix ... in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. Simply stated, ... narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (2000, p. 20)

Thus, narrative inquirers believe that it is through story that people construct,

structure, and recall experiences which are fundamental to their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry methodology reflects a view of “self” as a narrative, psycho-social production in which people bring their self, and its various identities, into being through a process of blending together the stories that they tell about their self with those that are told about their self by salient others (Forgas & Williams, 2002; McAdams, 1988, 1996; Shotter, 1997). Consequently, it is through the processes of telling and listening to stories that people narratively construct, and continually re-construct, who they are (Bruner, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Mishler, 2004; Søreide, 2006; Watson, 2006; Wortham, 2000). Additionally, narrative inquirers argue that, given that storied experience is so essential to identity and self (McAdams et al., 2001, p. xi), human experience is best understood through narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20; L. Richardson, 1990, p. 183).

The primary research products of a narrative inquiry are constructed, or co-constructed, accounts that re-present people’s personal and professional experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It follows, then, that an outcome of engagement with these narrative accounts is that they offer an opportunity for others to develop insights into, or come to understand, the ways in which particular individuals have been affected by the happenings in their lives (Dunn, 2003; Kelchtermans, 1993b; Trzebiński, 2005). Polkinghorne asserts that:

the power of a storied outcome is derived from its presentation of a distinctive individual, in a unique situation, dealing with issues in a personal manner; this power is contrasted with research findings which present *l’homme moyen*, the abstracted, statistically average person. (Gigerenzer et al., 1989, as cited in Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 18)

Clandinin and Connelly describe how they gradually “came to a narrative understanding of experience” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 1). They credit Dewey’s account of the nature of experience as having been the “conceptual, imaginative backdrop” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2) to their development of narrative inquiry, although other writers, too, have been acknowledged as influential in their thinking (pp. 1–16).²

For Clandinin and Connelly, any narrative inquiry is defined within “a metaphorical *three-dimensional narrative inquiry space*” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). The

² For example, anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Mary Catherine Bateson; Donald Polkinghorne; psychotherapist Robert Coles; and organisational researcher Barbara Czarniawska.

dimensions of this space include the: temporal – unfolding over time (past, present, and future); personal-social – occurring in interaction (intrapersonal and interpersonal); and situational – located within specific cultural and physical contexts. People's lives and the stories they tell are greatly influenced by each of these dimensions, and so narrative inquirers pay particular attention to these dimensions, both in the ways they conduct their research, and in the presentation of their research texts.

Recently, “four definitional points,” or “turns toward narrative,” have been identified as common to the published accounts of narrative inquirers (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, pp. 6–7). These turns include:

- (1) a change in the relationships between the person conducting the research and the person participating as the subject (the relationship between the researcher and the researched), (2) a move from the use of number toward the use of words as data, (3) a change from a focus on the general and universal toward the local and specific, and finally (4) a widening in acceptance of alternative epistemologies or ways of knowing. (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7)

It is the view of Pinnegar and Daynes that narrative inquirers need to have embraced each of these turns (pp. 6–7). These turns do not necessarily occur in any order, can occur over a period of time, and can be accepted to different degrees by different researchers, although to be a narrative inquirer is to embrace all four turns (2007). These turns provide a framework within which to explore further the essential principles of narrative inquiry.

Centrality of relationships

The first turn toward narrative is a relational one (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7). Thus, narrative inquirers “recognize and embrace the interactive quality of the researcher-researched relationship” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7).

Establishing good relationships with participants is essential to the conduct of the best qualitative research, because it is not possible for researchers to understand people by being distant from them (Ezzy, 2002). However, within narrative inquiry, good relationships are so crucial that their centrality is considered to be the distinguishing feature between narrative inquiry and other forms of narrative research (Clandinin, 2007, pp. xii–xiii; see also Josselson, 2007, p. 537).

In the field, researcher-participant relationships underpin much of what narrative inquirers do (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), because entering the field to investigate

the lived experience of participants means entering their social world and being in it with them (Ezzy, 2002). Consequently, narrative inquirers are said to live and work alongside participants in their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and it is this living and working alongside that makes narrative inquiry “the most compelling and appropriate way to study human interaction” (2000, as cited in Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 6).

Certainly, the quality of the relationship between the researcher and the participants can determine both the quality and the quantity of the data generated (Kelchtermans, 1999). Therefore, participants who trust the researcher and feel safe in the relationship are more inclined to share their stories (1999). Good data that is thick and rich in description will result, too, if researchers “attend to reciprocity ... through judicious use of self-disclosure” (J. Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001, p. 323). In this way, “researchers’ personal, private, and professional lives flow across the boundaries into the research site,” just as “participants’ lives flow the other way” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 115). Consequently, the quality of the relationships that are built, and the stories that are shared, tend to reflect the depth of the personal, emotional impact on researchers who choose to study social processes (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 174).

The relational focus of narrative inquiry fitted well with the MESH program at the centre of this study. Self-disclosures made by participants during support group sessions built trust and the relational bonds between the group participants, and the nature of these disclosures increased the rapport between my key teacher participants and me.

Stories as data

Narrative inquirers “primarily use stories as data” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7), and it is “the move to words as data” that has been identified as the second turn toward narrative (p. 3).

Human beings are natural story-tellers (Abbott, 2002), who “understand the world through narrative” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17; McAdams et al., 2001, p. x).³ It has been suggested by Abbott “that narrative is a ‘deep structure,’ a human capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds” (2002, p. 3). Many researchers are of

³ For a counter argument, see Strawson (2004).

the view, too, that it is through stories, and the act of storying and re-storying, that people construct, re-construct, and make sense of their own lives (Bateson, 1990; Bruner, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, 1990; Ezzy, 1998; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; McAdams, 1993, 1996; Mishler, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997; L. Richardson, 1990, p. 183), their lives in relation to others (Bruner, 2002; Elliott, 2005; Forgas & Williams, 2002; Gergen, 1998; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; McAdams, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Roberts, 2002), and their understanding of others' lives (Fairbairn, 2002; McAdams, 1993; Shabatay, 1991). Thus, it becomes evident that story has the power "to shape everyday experience" (Bruner, 2002, p. 7).

A narrative inquiry methodology makes use of this natural human inclination for storying experience by using story as a way of investigating experience and/or as a means of telling about people's experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). That is, the commonality between the various ways in which inquirers carry out narrative inquiries is the use of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, pp. 4–5). However, "what counts as stories, the kinds of stories [that narrative inquirers] choose to study, or the methods they use for study vary" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, pp. 4–5). Some narrative inquirers, for example, collect stories as data, and then code and analyse them thematically. An alternative approach, taken by other narrative inquirers, is to generate data from a variety of sources (such as observations, documentation, and interview) and transform that data into storied form. Importantly, all narrative inquirers bring their own understandings to their inquiries, and, ultimately, it must be recognized that there is no single, right way to conduct a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The opportunity for teachers (and other professionals) to story their life experiences is an integral component of the MESH program. Narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited as the methodology for this study, because it builds on the integral role of story to the MESH program.

Focus on the particular

Narrative inquirers acknowledge that people's lives are both complex and situated within a social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7). The third narrative turn – the turn toward a "focus on the particular" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 3) – reflects both the complexity and social embeddedness of life (Rosiek, 1994), and has resulted in an approach to research that is particularly

humanistic. It involves:

a turn away from ... grand scale pontification, a turn toward accounts of everyday happenings, here on the ground, amongst real people. Little narratives recover concreteness, particularity, individuality, and situatedness. They feature people as people, and actions as actions – instead of reducing them to examples of something else: data, or behaviors, viewed from somewhere “out there.” (Bowman, 2006, p. 9)

Narrative inquiry values the individuality of people’s lived experience as “lives composed over time and full of richness and complexity,” rather than as data to be “taken apart by analytic categories” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 22). This form of inquiry offers an alternative to positivistic research reporting which presents generalisable, “off-the-rack, one-size-fits-all accounts,” by featuring “people, values, intentions, and actions as opposed to entities, properties, rules, logic, and ‘behaviors’” (Bowman, 2006, p. 13). This has implications for research outcomes, because:

when we aggregate people, treating diversity as error variance, in search of what is common to all, we often learn about what is true of no one in particular. Narrative approaches allow us to witness the individual in her or his complexity and recognize that although some phenomena will be common to all, some will remain unique. (Josselson, 1995, pp. 32–33)

At least part of the attraction of the “little stories” of narrative inquiry, then, is that they are “local and situated;” they are valuable because they “offer resistant or counter-hegemonic” viewpoints (Bowman, 2006, p. 9).

The focus on the particular that is integral to narrative inquiry fitted well with my aim to understand each of my key teacher participants as a unique, “whole person.” The participants’ biographies, the contexts within which they each live and work, and the outcomes of their participation in the workshops are all unique. Consequently, the narrative biographical accounts allowed for my re-presentation of these individuals *as* individuals.

Acceptance of narrative ways of knowing

The fourth turn relates to the “kinds of knowing embraced by the researcher” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 6). Narrative inquirers accept that narrative ways of knowing are essential to narrative inquiry (p. 7), but, simultaneously, understand that alternative ways of knowing do exist.

“Meaning” is identified by Polkinghorne as an activity; a cognitive process

(Polkinghorne, 1988). Consequently, each of us has direct access only to our own meaning-making capacity, and the meaning that each person makes from her or his experience is not directly observable to others, including researchers. Yet, the outcomes of meaning-making – the behaviours enacted and the stories that are created as a result of meaningful human experiences – *are* able to be studied (p. 1). Moreover, it is through consciousness, language, and the act of storying, that human beings are able to make their own meaning of their experiences known to others.

Clandinin and Connelly have expressed their conviction that, “Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical” (2000, p. 121). It is their understanding that, “our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines” (p. 121). And this has been my experience. This study arose from my own experience of MESH, and the complex questions it raised about me as a teacher, and as a learner, about what we ask of teachers and students in schools, and how we prepare them for their experiences. My adoption of a narrative inquiry methodology allowed me to honour the individuality of each of my participants, and to respect the uniqueness of each of their stories. This approach fitted with my need to understand each of my participants as a complex, whole person, living and working within a social context. Furthermore, as the 3-day MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops involved the participating teachers in storying significant events in their lives, I recognised that narrative inquiry, with its focus on the study of lived experience, and storied lives (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1999, 2006), was a particularly appropriate methodology for this study.

Amongst the narrative accounts of my teacher participants, there may be some stories which could be classified as “cover stories,” described by Clandinin and her colleagues as “stories told to maintain a sense of continuity with the dominant stories of school shaping a professional knowledge landscape” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 7). More often, however, I believe that these teachers’ stories will be recognised as “secret stories,” which are “stories told only to others in safe places both on and off the school landscape” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 7). Importantly, I suggest it is the relational aspect of both narrative inquiry and the MESH program that creates safe places in which teachers feel free to share their secret stories.

Narrative inquiry: A critique

A criticism of narrative inquiry is that the person conducting the inquiry is too close to the topic being researched, and that the research(er) is, potentially, too subjective. In contrast to narrative inquiry, phenomenology, which shares a focus on the individual's perceptions of their experiences, strives to provide an objective stance (Gruppetta, 2004, pp. 3–4). The phenomenological researcher is expected to “bracket” herself; “to hold prior knowledge or belief about the phenomena under study in suspension in order to perceive it more clearly” (Powers & Knapp, 1995, as cited in LeVasseur, 2003). However, the proposal that any researcher can maintain such a stance is a difficult, if not “impossible,” one (Toma, 2000, p. 177; see also Barone, 2000a; Hatch, 2002, p. 15), because the researcher is, inextricably, a “central and omnipresent figure” in the qualitative research process (Mantzoukas, 2004, p. 1002).

Toma supports the view that positive relationships between the researcher and participants result in the generation of good data (2000, p. 177). Subjective researchers, then, do not seek to create unnecessary barriers between themselves, their research, and research participants. Rather, they appreciate that their research is “inherently personal” (Toma, 2000, p. 182), and that *all* inquiry is value-laden; “human beings can never be completely value-free” (R. B. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 16; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8; Janesick, 2000, p. 385; McNiff, 2007, p. 319; Stake, 1995, p. 95). Hence, the notion of the totally objective researcher is flawed (Hite, 1980; R. B. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 16; Toma, 2000). In light of this argument, Barone has concluded that the death of one concept – objectivity – within a dyadic relationship, means that “its conceptual twin” – subjectivity – “is also dead” (Barone, 2000a, pp. 161–162).

In dealing with issues of subjectivity and objectivity, Stake argues that an alternative approach is for our research texts “to give the reader a good look at the researcher” (1995, p. 95). Throughout this dissertation I have provided the reader with insights into my motivations, beliefs, assumptions and salient experiences. In recent times, this approach has become more widely accepted because it is understood that the researcher's understanding “about the situation or phenomenon under study impacts on the nature of the ‘data’ generated,” in ways which are more positive than had previously been understood (Moyle, 2002, as cited in Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007, p.

69). According to this view, when researchers invest their time in building and maintaining relationships with their participants, the data generated is often deeper, richer, and more reliable than might otherwise have been the case.

My decision to undertake a narrative inquiry, then, reflects my view of research as a relational practice; a practice in which researchers come to deep understanding by closely attending to participants and their stories of individual experience.



Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this research project was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network at the University of Tasmania prior to the commencement of the study (see Appendix E), and an amendment later approved. (see Appendix F).



Data generation

This section describes the methods and techniques used in order to generate data, as a means to answering the questions posed in *Chapter 1*. Building on understandings I developed in my pre-formal study experience with the MESH program, this study was undertaken in three phases and used a variety of research methods and techniques.

Phase 1 of the study involved *past* teacher participants in the MESH workshops. In this phase, methods of data generation included a survey by questionnaire, and focus group interviews. Methods used in *Phase 2*, which investigated the experience of *current* participants in the MESH PD workshops, included a series of three individual interviews with each participant using a life-history model (Seidman, 1991), and full participant-observation. In *Phase 3*, I interviewed Cheryl Watkins, the founder of the Student Assistance Program in the USA, and Nairn Walker, the Australian facilitator for MESH Support Group Facilitator Training.

My decision-making processes are described in detail in this section, and I have also provided a synopsis of these processes in diagrammatic form. Figure 1 (adapted from Kelchtermans, 1993a, p. 204) provides an illustration of the ways in which each method of data generation and analysis informed the next, resulting in an iterative

process.

Phase 1: Past MESH PD workshop participants

Phase 1 built on the foundation of my experience of the MESH PD (see *Prologue*, p. ii, and *Introduction*, p. 11). This exploratory phase consisted of a survey by questionnaire sent to all teachers and other professionals working in Tasmanian schools, who had previously taken part in 3-day MESH PD workshops. Focus group interviews were then conducted with a small number of volunteer respondents to the questionnaire. Both the questionnaire and the focus group interviews addressed workshop attendee demographics and the nature of the enduring outcomes of participation in MESH PD.

Questionnaire

Survey by questionnaire is, perhaps, more usually aligned with the positivist paradigm. Nevertheless, I recognised that this form of survey was an efficient way to access the entire population of past teacher participants in the MESH workshops, and so I made the decision to include a questionnaire as my first method of data generation. The questionnaire was designed to elicit from participants their perceptions of the PD experience.

The questionnaire was designed to be short enough to be manageable by busy teachers. It allowed for the generation of demographic data, and provided for multiple choice and open-ended responses to other questions. The inclusion of open-ended questions provided respondents with enough space to give short written responses, thus providing greater freedom of expression than did other sections of the questionnaire (Burns, 2000, p. 572; Denscombe, 1998, p. 101).

According to Nairn Walker's documentation, 302 individuals, including myself, had undertaken training in Support Group Facilitator Training between 1997 and July, 2004. Of this number, 178 people had self-identified as working in Tasmanian schools when they enrolled for the workshop; these people were the research population for *Phase 1*. Given the relatively small size of this population, and the likely response rate to the survey, it seemed appropriate to undertake a census; a survey of 100 per cent of the population (Burns, 2000, p. 567).

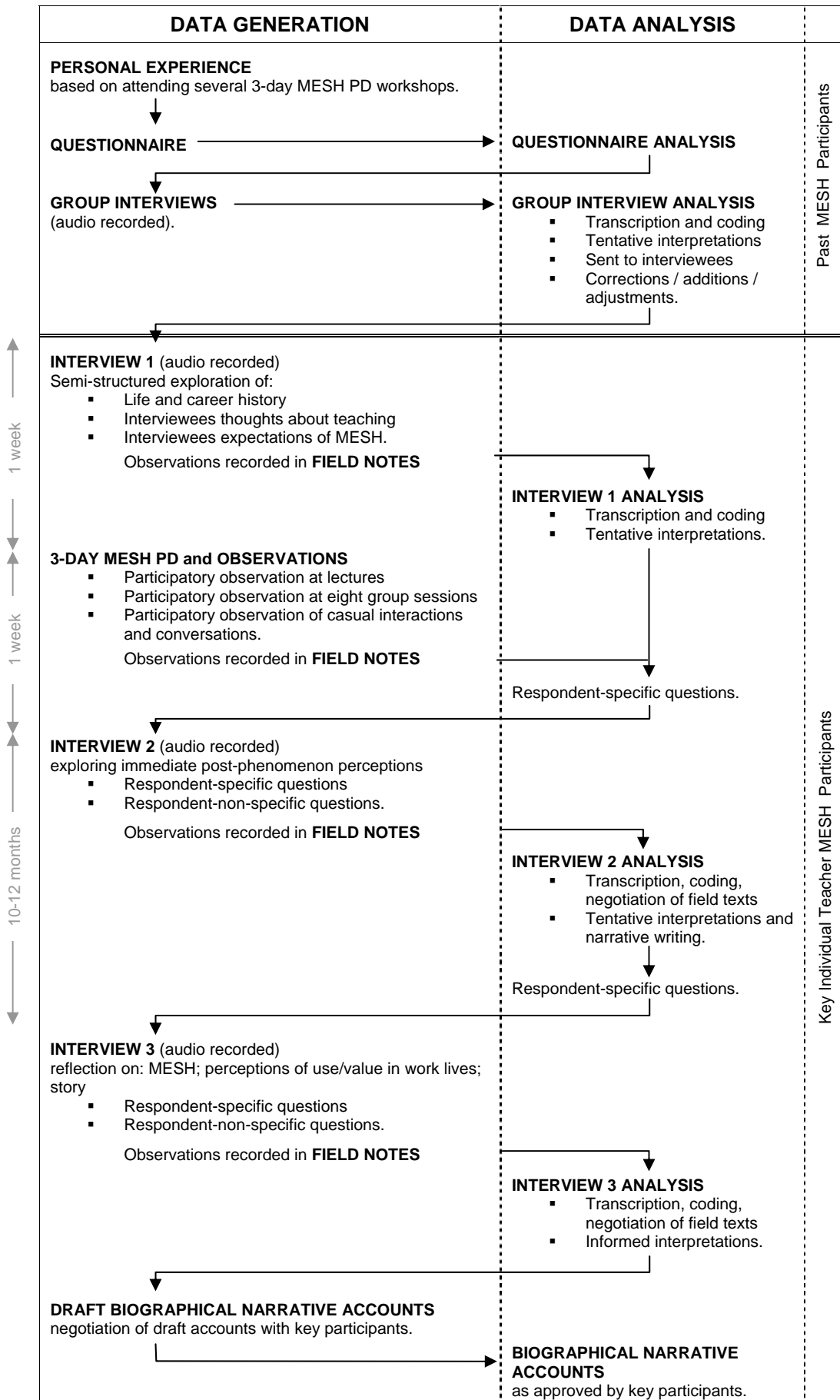


Figure 1 – Overview of the research process (adapted from Kelchtermans, 1993, p. 204)

On 1st July 2004, Nairn Walker mailed one research pack to each of the 178 past participants, on my behalf and at my expense. Each past participant received a *Letter of Introduction* from Nairn Walker (see Appendix G), a *Letter of Introduction* from me (see Appendix H), an *Information Sheet* (see Appendix I), a *Questionnaire* (see Appendix J), and an *Expression of Interest* (see Appendix K) which respondents could complete and return in order to indicate their willingness to participate in a focus group interview. Ten packs were returned, undelivered.

Of the 168 packs delivered, respondents returned 56 completed questionnaires (33.33%), a rate of return which was consistent with expectations (Burns, 2000, p. 581; Denscombe, 1998, p. 24). I was pleased with the number and adequacy of the responses I received, particularly in regard to the open-ended questions.

Analysis of questionnaire data

It was not my intention to report my “findings in terms of the kinds of complex statistical measures or methods to which quantitative researchers are drawn” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 9). Rather, in the analysis of the data, descriptive statistics – simple count and percentage analysis – were used to summarise the demographic and other data. The open-ended narrative responses were coded, categorised and analysed by content. This analysis oriented me to, and within, the study, and grounded me in the key issues identified by past participants. It illuminated the outcomes of their participation in the MESH workshop, and the influence of the workshop on their personal and professional lives since. Alongside the knowledge gained from my own MESH PD experience, the analysis of the questionnaire data informed the design of the *Focus Group Interview Guide* (R. S. Weiss, 1994; see Appendix L).

Focus group participant recruitment

Twenty three of the 56 questionnaire respondents expressed interest in participating in focus group interviews. I arranged four focus group interviews around Tasmania, two in Launceston (North), one in Ulverstone (North West), and one in Hobart (South). Due to some difficulties related to the timing of the interviews and the subsequent unavailability of some participants, nine people (six women and three men) participated in three focus groups interviews. Ultimately, the interview in Ulverstone did not proceed. Six participants were classroom teachers, two were

school principals, and one was a school counsellor.

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews can be used as either a stand-alone qualitative method, or as one method in a multi-method approach (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 651; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996, p. 15; Wilkinson, 2004, p. 178). This method is particularly useful in the exploratory stage of a research project (Vaughn et al., 1996, p. 6), as it provides a practical and economical means of accessing group members' perceptions of shared experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Wilkinson, 2004, pp. 178–179).

Focus group interviews tend to straddle the line between formal and informal interviewing techniques (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Although, ideally, it is the interviewer who fosters interaction and discussion between group members (Wilkinson, 2004, pp. 178–179), focus group interviews are considered “relatively egalitarian” because group participants have the opportunity to influence the direction of the discussion (p. 181). Over the course of the interview, group members' ideas and responses are built upon, creating a synergistic effect, allowing for the possibility of unanticipated insights being generated (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 182). Therefore, more complex accounts than would otherwise have been offered may be generated, resulting in the prospect of richer data for the researcher. It was for these reasons that I decided to use focus group interviews as one method of data generation. My intention in these interviews was to probe past participants' memories regarding their participation experiences, and to elicit from them the details of the enduring outcomes of their participation in MESH workshops (see *Focus Group Interview Guide*, Appendix L; *Focus Group Consent Form*, Appendix M).

A common concern of researchers conducting focus group interviews is that participant “confidentiality cannot be assured” (Patton, 2002, p. 387). However, as a result of their prior MESH group participation, all participants were familiar with the obligation to maintain group confidentiality. Nevertheless, I did stress the need for participants to keep the content of interviews confidential, and, prior to the interview, each participant signed a consent form in which they agreed to maintain confidentiality. The fact that I was unable to *guarantee* that individuals would respect confidentiality was a disclosure I made to each group prior to interview.

Another concern, often raised in discussions on group interviews, is that one or more group members may dominate discussion. Whether or not this domination is intentional, it can result in less assertive group members having fewer opportunities to put their own point of view. I was aware that inequitable time allocation was a possible outcome of this type of interview, and I was attentive to this possibility. Indeed, there were times when I believed this might have been an issue, and in such circumstances I would thank the speaker for her or his thoughts and then move on to ask whether someone else had a similar or different perspective to offer. Alternatively, I would ask a question that I felt was a natural follow-up to the comments that had been offered, or move on to the next question on my *Focus Group Interview Guide*.

I was conscious that interviewees had voluntarily invested their time in my research project, so, at the end of each focus group interview, I presented each of them with a handmade “thank you” card and boxed chocolates as a token of my appreciation.

Focus group interview data transformation

The procedures I followed to record, transcribe and negotiate interview data were identical in both *Phase 1* and *Phase 2* of the study. I have fully documented these processes in the section describing *Phase 2* (*Recording interviews* section, see p. 329; *Transcription* section, see p. 330; *Negotiating the field texts* section, see p. 331).

Analysis of focus group interview data

The analysis of the focus group interview data began with the transcription of the audio-recorded interviews (see *Transcription* section, p. 329). Following focus group members’ approval of the transcripts, I undertook a process of reading and re-reading the data, with the intention of identifying themes inherent within the text. “Thematic analysis” according to Ezzy “allows categories to emerge from the data” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 83). I used an approach consistent with the analysis of narrative approach described by Barone (2001) and Polkinghorne (1995).

Layered over my experiences and the analysis of the survey by questionnaire, the analysis of the group interviews allowed me to develop a deeper level of understanding of the experiences of past participants of the MESH PD. As a result of the analysis, too, some enduring outcomes for past participants of the MESH PD

program were indicated, giving me further insights into the nature of the outcomes that might emerge for the key teacher participants I aimed to recruit to *Phase 2* of the study. The prime functions of these data in this dissertation were to inform the next phase and, consequently, the findings are not fully reported in the dissertation itself.

Phase 2: Current MESH PD workshop participants

Phase 2 began with the recruitment of seven key teacher participants. An initial interview with each of these key participants took place prior to their MESH PD experience. This interview sought to establish participants' life and work contexts, as well as their expectations of their workshop participation. Within the week following the initial interview, I acted as full participant-observer as I lived alongside Nairn Walker and my key participants, observing and field-noting their experiences of the phenomenon during one of three 3-day MESH PD workshops. Then, a second interview was conducted with each participant in the week following their experience in order to capture their responses to the workshop and their experience of it. Approximately a year later, I conducted a final reflective interview with individual participants that probed their memories of the MESH experience, and sought to discover the ways in which they had drawn on their experience in their personal and professional lives.

Each interview conducted during *Phase 2* was followed by transcription, checking of the field text/transcript by each participant, narrative data analysis and interpretation. The details of these processes are explained later in this chapter (see p. 329).

Individual participant recruitment

In order to recruit participants to *Phase 2*, I prepared information packs consisting of a *Letter of Introduction* from Nairn Walker (see Appendix N), a *Letter of Introduction* from me (see Appendix O), an *Information Sheet* (see Appendix P), and a *Participant Consent Form* (see Appendix Q). On my behalf, Nairn Walker sent one pack to each person working in a school context who had enrolled in one of three 3-day MESH PD workshops to be held during September and October, 2004, in Devonport, Launceston and Hobart in Tasmania. A total of 22 information packs were posted, and I was contacted by seven individuals, all of whom were recruited to participate in this phase of the study.

Phase 2 participants were not, therefore, a random sample. Rather, they self-selected into the study from a population of professionals, working within a school context, who had enrolled in the MESH PD. These seven participants were “information-rich” sources, who were prepared to share their experiences, and from whom I felt I would be able to “learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Additionally, they committed themselves, and their time, to be interviewed on three occasions during a 1-year period, consented to being observed by me over the course of 3 days at a MESH PD workshop, and met with me to review the biographical narrative accounts I constructed from the data. These participants all shared their stories as far as they felt able or inclined so to do. Without their commitment, this study would not have been possible.

Informed consent

The university ethics committee-approved *Information Sheet* (Appendix P) and *Participant Consent Form* (Appendix Q) gave participants a very formal, procedural overview of what their participation in my study would involve (Josselson, 2007, pp. 539–541). However, from a relational point of view, I felt that it was important for me to discuss with my participants, as far as was possible, before the research commenced, what my expectations of them were (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 171; Josselson, 2007), and I did this in a short but personal explanation.

One limitation of my approach to participants which concerned me was that, whilst the experiential and emotional nature of the program is advertised, many participants are not aware until partway through the first morning of the PD of the full implications for them of their participation. For some of my participants, at least, the self-disclosure requirements, which are part of their role in the co-facilitation of support groups, would have been unanticipated. Consequently, that may have influenced and had implications for their intention to continue in the study. For me, this raised the question of how well-informed my participants’ decision to consent might be considered. In such matters, Clandinin and Connelly advise narrative researchers to look to “their responsibility as researchers” (2000, p. 171; see also Josselson, 2007). After consulting my conscience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 172), I concluded that my participants’ involvement in the MESH PD did not differ from that of other attendees. At the time participants consented to participate in the study, they were each informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any

time. Additionally, prior to each interview, I checked that each participant was content to continue in the study. Despite my initial concerns, all seven of my key participants chose to remain in the study for its duration.

Interviews

I chose interviews as a primary means of data generation, because I recognised that interviewing is an effective means for researchers to understand the meaning that participants make of any experience, as “the very process of putting experience into language is a meaning-making process” (Vygotsky, as cited in Seidman, 1991, p. 12). However, researchers can choose from a number of different types of interview, and these fall along a continuum from “tightly structured, survey interviews with preset, standardized, normally closed questions” to “open-ended, apparently unstructured, anthropological interviews” more closely resembling “friendly conversations” (1991, p. 9). It was this latter option that best fitted my theoretical perspective, and for which I felt most enthusiasm.

During the interviews, I sought to generate “in-depth information” from my participants, on their “feelings, experiences, and perceptions” (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 12, as cited in Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 162). Ideally, these data are generated through “long and uninterrupted narratives” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, as cited in Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007, p. 68), although this outcome is reliant upon the narrative competence of interviewees, and the restraint of the interviewer, to at least some degree.

Active listening by the interviewer can encourage narrative responses from interviewees, although there is more to this practice than “just being quiet” (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 177). Rather, it is a process during which the researcher “must actively question, ask for explanations, and show a genuine deep curiosity about the [participant’s] views and feelings” (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 177). She must also be prepared to “ask follow-up questions tailored to the preceding answers, and seek to learn about interrelated belief systems or personal approaches to things” (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 177). This process can make considerable intellectual demands of researchers, as I was to discover.

During the processes of conducting, listening to, transcribing, and later reading the interview conversations, I was aware that I occasionally interrupted my interviewees’

accounts. Initially, I was concerned that these interruptions may have modified the course and content of the interview conversation (Chafe, 1998, pp. 283–284), and that topics may then have developed based on this interaction. However, rather than limiting my participants' narratives, it appears that the conversational nature of the interviews actively encouraged participants to elaborate further on their experiences (Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007, p. 74), which was precisely the aim of my research. The interview data generated during this research project, then, are “a product of the mutual interaction between speaker and listener” (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 64).

Furthermore, this type of dialogic interaction is important to interviewees, as they “do not simply reproduce prefabricated stories regardless of the interactional situation, but rather create their stories within the social process of mutual orientation according to their definition of the interview situation” (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 64). In preference to considering life histories to be “finished products ready to be ‘served up’ on demand,” Rosenthal (1993, p. 65) believes that:

the story evolves around a thematic topic, usually established by the interviewer, in a manner judged by the narrator to be of interest to the listener. The topics can center on a certain period of the biographer's life, on experiences arising in connection with certain historical or social events, or on a single biographical strand such as the person's occupational career. By putting forward such topics, the interview is providing the biographers with a framework for selecting the stories to be included. (p. 65)

Interviewees, then, have a tendency to interpret the topic of the research and make a decision as to whether to “orient their narration primarily toward what they suppose to be of interest to the interviewer or to themselves” and it is this decision that decides the outcome of the interview (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 65). In other words, not all control in an interview rests with the researcher.

As a beginning researcher, I found Goodson's claim, that there is no “one, ‘proper’ way of doing life history research,” thoroughly reassuring (2001, p. 19). It is Goodson's belief that it is the personal style of the interviewer, her distinctive connection to the topic under study, and the nature of the research study itself that will give each project its unique flavour: “Indeed, the extent to which life history methodology is individualistic and personal, relying as it does on ‘intensely idiosyncratic personal dynamics’ (Sikes et al., 1996, p. 43) is a defining characteristic of the approach” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 19).

Three-interview series

One such interview approach, designed by Dolbeare and Schuman, is described by Seidman as being a combination of “life-history interview” and “focused, in-depth interviewing” (1991, p. 9). This interviewing approach is commonly known as the “three-interview series” (p. 9), because of the recommendation that a series of three (90-minute) interviews be conducted with individual interviewees (p. 14).

Seidman describes a structured individual focus for each interview in the series, and recommends that researchers adhere to this structure, making it possible for interviewers to “establish a substantial relationship with participants over time” (Seidman, 1991, p. 15). The advantage inherent in this relationship is that interviewees come to better understand the value that researchers place on their participants’ “experiences and points of view” (Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007, p. 73).

This relational understanding between researcher and participants is congruent with the philosophies at the heart of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and acknowledged my need to find an appropriate and sympathetic means of generating data for the purposes of this study.

The design of the three-interview series is based on the belief that “people’s behaviour becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Without context,” Seidman believes, “there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience” (1991, p. 10).

Interview 1: Focused life history

The first interview, then, was designed to elicit contextual data from participants by taking a life history interview approach (Seidman, 1991, p. 11). Consequently, I was interested to know about the school contexts within which each of my seven participants worked, as well as understand how participants came to be enrolled in the MESH PD workshops (see *Interview Guide 1*, Appendix R). Seidman describes how this approach contextualises the data generated:

By asking “how?” we hope to have [participants] reconstruct a range of constitutive events in their past family, school, and work experiences that place their participation in the professional development ... program in the context of their lives. (Seidman, 1991, p. 11)

Four of these interviews were conducted within the school in which participants

worked, two in participants' homes and the other in a bar and grill.⁴

Participant-observation: 3-day MESH PD workshop

Following the first interview of the three-interview series, each participant attended one of the 3-day MESH PD workshops. I also attended each of the workshops in order to: further develop my own understanding of the program; increase the level of rapport with my research participants; and observe and document – in an unstructured way – my observations of my participants' experiences.

Unstructured observations are consistent with constructivist research in that:

observers using unstructured methods usually enter 'the field' with no predetermined notions as to the discrete behaviours that they might observe. They may have some ideas as to what to observe, but these may change over time as they gather data and gain experience in the particular setting. (Mulhall, 2003, p. 307)

In the field, the role adopted by participant observers is dependent upon the research paradigm, the nature of the research topic, the specific context of the research setting, and the relationship between the observer and the observed. Thus, the role adopted by researchers using this method has a tendency to vary greatly:

from being a complete observer, who does not participate in group activities and is publicly defined as a researcher, to being a covert participant, who acts just like other group members and does not disclose his or her research role. (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 165)

The role I adopted was somewhere between these two polarities, as is common of participant-observers (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 167). On the first day of the MESH PD workshop, during the introductory stage of the first group session (see *MESH Support Group Facilitator Training Schedule*, Appendix C), I informed all group members of my researcher status and my purpose for being present (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 186).⁵ I also participated fully in all group and workshop activities.

⁴ Something I will attempt to avoid in future (see Patrick Jamieson's narrative account, p. 208).

⁵ Group members who had identified themselves as working within a school context would have already received my information pack from Nairn Walker following their registration for the workshop.

It is difficult to judge the extent to which my disclosure affected the activities and responses of individuals, particularly during the support group process, for "the effects of the observer's presence can never be erased" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. 643). Nevertheless, the groups appeared to me, and to Nairn Walker, to be as effective as those groups I had attended prior to entering the data generation phase of the research, and those I have attended since. As far as we could ascertain, just as many personal disclosures were made by group members, as many hugs exchanged, as many laughs laughed, as many tears shed as in other groups. I made the boundaries of my research clear and I believe that this and my wholehearted immersion in the group process (and facilitation or co-

“Qualitative observation,” according to Ezzy, “is best done when the observer becomes part of the dance” (2002, p. xii). Moreover, I realised that this research had the potential to be less successful had I chosen to take anything other than a full participant-observer role. The group process is not an activity during which an outsider might simply observe, and not participate, without affecting the dynamics of the group and the scope of the disclosures made. There is an expectation, too, that all members who are present will join the group and “close the circle,” as well as pledge that they will maintain the confidentiality of the group. Although “everyone has the right to pass” and remain silent, it is expected that “everyone participates even if it’s in his or her own head” (Student Assistance Program Training Institute, n.d.; see *Support Group Purposes and Guidelines*, Appendix D).

Furthermore, at the time my participant-observations were made, I was acting as Nairn’s co-facilitator for the initial and final group sessions of each workshop.⁶ Consequently, as a co-facilitator of the initial group session, there was the expectation that I would make disclosures of a personal nature in order to model this process to group members. I had “set the tone” for disclosure on a number of occasions at previous MESH workshops, and did so during the first group session of each of the three workshops at which I was a participant-observer researcher. I believe that these initial disclosures – my stories of events in my life that were personally challenging – had the additional, but unanticipated, benefit of building on the level of rapport I had already established with my participants during our first interview. My own stories provided insight insofar as they allowed my participants to know who I am as a person, rather than as a researcher. Understandably, reciprocity of this nature is likely to enhance trust and credibility (Kelchtermans, 1999, p. 9).

I found, too, that my observations – which bore witness to my participants’ interactions, conversations and stories – together with the effect of participants telling their own stories and listening to others’ stories during the group sessions, influenced my understanding of their individual experiences. These observations

facilitation of groups), meant that my researcher status mattered little to non-participant group members shortly after my initial disclosure.

Moreover, many non-participants showed interest in my research, more so as each group moved into its later phases.

⁶ This would be typical of anyone who had previously experienced the MESH group process. An “outsider” may have cause to believe that I was too involved in the research setting, however group participants co-facilitate six of the eight groups, so my role, after the first couple of group sessions would not have been seen as unusual by those present. Another of my roles was preparing group members to co-facilitate group sessions.

“may have led [me] to highlight or attend to other future events and conversations in more thoughtful and different ways” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 173). I maintain that my full participant status, and the inclusion of unstructured observation as a method within the design of the study, was essential to the process of understanding and interpreting my participants’ behaviours and experiences (Mulhall, 2003, p. 306).

The role of complete participant-observer, however, was “not [always] an easy balancing act” (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 167). Like a covert researcher, I could not write field notes during my observations of the group process itself (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 168), because I felt that to do so would have been both disconcerting to group members and have affected the trust within the group. I was aware, too, that whatever my participants chose to divulge to the group was not the primary purpose for my being present. Rather, my purpose was “to gain a direct sense of what group members experience” (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 167) as a result of the group process, or as active participants in the MESH PD workshop. As a consequence, none of the stories told by participants during the group process were recorded, however I did make mental notes regarding the content of participants’ contributions and comments. These informed my understandings of individual participants, and I drew on my knowledge of their stories in my discussions with them in post-MESH interviews.

Observational field notes that I did make were usually written in a short form following the group sessions, sometimes during the dedicated lecture times when participants themselves were frequently note-taking. Later, these field notes that recorded “snippets” of my participants’ conversations, behaviours, and actions, as well as my own puzzlements, intuition and hunches, would be the starting point for writing more detailed reflections. Some of these field notes were eventually elaborated upon and became part of my research text.

Beyond this process of observation and notation, when I felt that my participants’ interpretations would offer insights into their experience, I would raise these issues during the second (post-MESH experience) interview with them. This was one means of increasing the trustworthiness of the study (Maxwell, 2002, pp. 48–49).

Interview 2: Details of experience

The second interview of the three-interview series took place within a week of my participants' experiences of the MESH PD. My purpose, during this interview in the series, was to enable "participants to reconstruct the details of their experience" (Seidman, 1991, p. 11) of the 3-day workshop (see *Interview Guide 2*, Appendix S).

Specifically, I wanted to understand my participants' experiences of the MESH PD workshop, and to know whether their participation had impacted on their knowledge of self, of others, and/or of themselves in relation with others. I asked, too, what they had found to be useful or difficult during the PD. Additionally, I wanted to know whether they had recommended, or would recommend, MESH PD to a friend or colleague.

This second interview was also forward-looking, in that I asked the participants what, if anything, they believed they had learned or experienced in the workshops that would be useful for their teaching practice. I was also interested in their intentions regarding the possible implementation and facilitation of support groups within their own school context.

Beyond the generic guide I used with all participants during the second interview, I had also developed questions for each participant based on my observations of participants during the workshops. These individual-oriented questions prompted participants to recall their experience in finer detail, and enabled them to corroborate or clarify my interpretations of their experience as part of the ongoing process of data analysis and interpretation (Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007, p. 74).

Interview 3: Reflections on meaning

The third and final interview with participants "encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them" (Seidman, 1991, p. 11). Seidman suggests that the three interviews in the series should be spaced "from 3 days to a week apart," but is open to the idea of researchers varying from this advice if this better suits their purpose (pp. 14–15). In order to ascertain the existence and nature of any "enduring outcomes" (Barone, 2001), I wanted to allow sufficient time to have elapsed between participants' second (post-MESH experience) interview, and this final interview. This third interview, then, took place approximately a year after

the second interview.⁷

In seeking to discover the meaning for participants, I asked them about the memories and feelings they associated with their MESH PD experience (see *Interview Guide 3*, Appendix T). They were also asked about what they felt was the “best thing” resulting from their participation, and whether they had changed any of their work practices because of understandings they had gained from participating in the PD. Furthermore, I asked participants about their response to their experience, and their perceptions of the value of telling their own stories and listening to the stories of others. If, during the course of the interview, I discovered that participants had been facilitating support groups in their schools, I was also interested to hear of these experiences, and I was keen to record anecdotes relating to student outcomes of which participants were aware.

Additionally, as an adjunct to the generic guide I had prepared for this interview, I had developed more questions for each individual, based on the transcripts from my previous interviews with each of them. In this way, this third interview became more personally relevant to each individual participant.

Phase 3: Australian facilitator and US founder

In *Phase 3* of the study, I conducted two one-off, individual interviews.

The first of these interviews was conducted face-to-face with Nairn Walker, the Australian facilitator of MESH Support Group Facilitator Training. I lived alongside Nairn during numerous 3-day MESH PD workshops (both in Tasmania and in Victoria), co-facilitated groups with her, and during our time together I had many conversations with her about her involvement in MESH. As we usually travelled together and shared accommodation while away, many of her stories, and most of her initiation into the MESH program, were well known to me prior to our formal interview. This interview, therefore, was conducted principally in order to record Nairn’s account in her own voice, but also provided an opportunity for the expansion of my existing understandings (see *Facilitator Introductory Letter*, Appendix U; *Facilitator Information Sheet*, Appendix V; *Facilitator Consent Form*, Appendix W).

The second interview was with Cheryl Watkins, the founder of the Student Assistance Program in the US. Cheryl had planned to visit Australia to facilitate an

⁷ Except in the case of Geoff Murray, who was interviewed 10 months after the second interview.

Advanced MESH training workshop in late 2006,⁸ and so, when I received an invitation to attend the workshop, I applied for an amendment to my original ethics application (see *Ethics Amendment*, Appendix F) in order that I could interview her about her foundation of the program (see *Founder Introductory Letter*, Appendix X; *Founder Information Sheet*, Appendix Y; *Founder Consent Form*, Appendix Z). However, Cheryl's journey did not eventuate, and as an alternative to a face-to-face interview, I sent my interview questions to her by e-mail (via Nairn Walker; see *Founder Interview Schedule*, Appendix AA), and Cheryl responded in narrative form by e-mail, and provided further information by facsimile transmission.



Data transformation

In this section, I discuss the methods I used to transform interview data from spoken language to written text. Part of this transformation involves the analysis and interpretation of the data. My use of the term “narrative interpretive-analysis” in this section acknowledges that analysis and interpretation are not “mutually exclusive” processes (Wolcott, 1994, p. 11; see also, Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Indeed, in research practice, the terms analysis and interpretation “are often combined ... or used interchangeably” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 11). Finally, I explain the process I used to construct, and negotiate, the seven biographical narrative accounts.

Recording interviews

All the interviews that I conducted were recorded using both tape and digital voice recorders. The presence of these recording tools during the interviews was “routinely ignored” by participants (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 180). Only once did an interviewee ask me to pause the recorders to speak to me “off the record,” and I acceded to this request.

At the end of an interview, interviewees would regularly add to our interview conversation as they walked me out of their office, school, or home (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 180). Afterwards, I would record as much as I could recall of these continuances as field notes, usually as I sat in my car after the interview.

⁸ The training was planned for late 2006, postponed until early 2007, and then cancelled.

Whenever possible,⁹ I transcribed each interview (see *Transcription* section, following) in the series prior to beginning the next step of data generation.

Transcription

I transcribed all of the interview data. This arrangement is said to be ideal, because it does give another opportunity to engage with and reconsider the material at a deeper level (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, 2000, p. 707). Transcription, however, was a long, tedious and exhausting process, resulting in the production of over 1,200 pages of interview text. After transcription, I replayed each audio recording to check for accuracy, and thereby added to the trustworthiness of the study and assisted in “establishing dependability and confirmability” (Easton et al., 2000, p. 707; see also Woods, 1986, p. 82). I found that listening to the interview conversations during the processes of transcription and accuracy checking was the next cognitive step in both analysis and interpretation (Kvale, 1996, pp. 16, 165; Riessman, 1993, pp. 13, 51, 60), acknowledging that the first step towards understanding had occurred during the interview conversations themselves.

The transcription of interview data involves what could appear to be “seemingly mundane choices of what to include and how to arrange and display the text” (Riessman, 1993, p. 12). These not so simple choices, however, “have serious implications for how a reader will understand the narrative” (p. 12). In all instances, “the recorded interviews were transcribed in their entirety, word for word as spoken, that is, with no respect for the rules of written language” (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 71). Additionally, paralinguistic features were transcribed (Riessman, 1993, p. 12). I used capitalization in order to indicate emphasis. Despite these inclusions, there is, undeniably, some loss of data, and an associated potential loss of meaning, which occurs in the transformation from spoken language into written text (Riessman, 1993, p. 11; see also Wolcott, 2001, p. 32).

During the transcription process, I de-identified the data, assigning pseudonyms for most named people and places (Josselson, 2007, p. 542), and recorded these in a secure electronic document.

⁹ When four participants all attended one MESH PD workshop in Hobart, this was not possible because of the constraints of time and distance, so, as a preliminary measure, I listened to each interview recording and made copious pre-transcript notes from the interview conversations prior to conducting the second interview in the series of three.

Negotiating the field texts

Each focus group and individual interviewee was sent her/his interview transcript via her/his preferred method of delivery, so that each could check these for accuracy. This process is intended to increase the credibility of the research (Woods, 1986, p. 86). Participants were asked to “correct, clarify, or modify” the text, where they deemed this necessary. I had, however, pre-empted the urge my teacher participants might have felt to correct or delete syntactic and grammatical errors, thinking sounds, and verbal stumblings. I requested them to resist changing, as far as they were able, the idiosyncrasies of their spoken language:

the false starts, any ums and ahs, etc. if you’re comfortable doing that. These are all part of spoken language and I undertake to “clean up” the text later, where necessary, if I intend to quote from it. (my accompanying e-mail/letter)

This process resulted in a few minor corrections to the transcript. A small clarification was also added by one participant. These modifications were incorporated into the transcripts prior to data reduction and analysis.

The transcripts prompted these comments from Amy Warden and Gordon Royce, two of my *Phase 1* focus group interviewees:

The transcript made fascinating reading. You did well to interpret from the tape. I got as much reassurance just reading it as I did in August. Thanks for taking on this project. I’m keen to help in any way I can. Cheers, Amy.

And:

So okay I need to polish up on the logical delivery of my verbal! Hope it is okay to help with your studies though. Thank you for the card and the chocs ... very yummy. Was good to catch up and only too happy to try to assist with your studies. Keep well – good luck with your studies. Best wishes, Gordon.

Vivienne Deane, a participant from the individual *Phase 2* interviews responded to the transcripts of our interview by saying:

I’ve gone through the transcripts. I can’t believe how incoherently I spoke – I’ll have to improve on that. Other than that they were fine. Let me know when you are down this way and we’ll sort out the next step. Thanks, Vivienne.

None of the interviewees chose to delete any of the interview transcript text.

I kept an *Interview and Transcription Progress Report* (see Appendix AB) in which I recorded the progress of interview, transcription, de-identification and participant confirmation processes. Once each one in the series of three interview conversations had been confirmed by my interviewees my on-going analysis intensified.

Narrative interpretive-analysis

In all qualitative research, data analysis is a “central concern;” an ongoing, reflexive, cyclic activity, embedded within the research design from data generation to the writing of the research text (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 6). Indeed, Weiss suggests that “the kind of report that will be written and the kind of analysis that will be done must be decided jointly” (1994, p. 152). Consequently, my decision to construct seven individual biographical narrative accounts from the data necessitated the analysis and interpretation of “the voices *within*” *each* participant’s data set “rather than locating distinct themes *across*” *all* participants’ data sets (Chase, 2005, p. 663; see also Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 31; R. S. Weiss, 1994, p. 152). Qualitative data analysis and interpretation are related, because analysis is itself an interpretive process (Ezzy, 2002).

Narrative analysis was appropriate for my research purposes, because it “allows for systematic study of personal experience and meaning” (Riessman, 1993, p. 70). McAdams, however, drawing from Bruner’s work, observes that:

Meaning is not inherent in an act or experience but is constructed through social discourse. Meaning is generated by the linkages the participant makes between aspects of the life he or she is living and his or her understandings of these aspects. (2001, pp. xi–xii)

The study of meaning is problematic, because meaning resides in human consciousness, and is not directly accessible (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 7). Nevertheless, access to the meanings that people give to their experiences can be made available to others through language (p. 7), during interview conversations, for example.

Riessman warns that “narratives, especially those about important life experiences, are typically long, full of asides, comments, flashbacks, flashforwards, orientation, and evaluation. It is naive to think that one can ‘just present the story’ without some systematic method of reduction” (Riessman, 1993, p. 43).

Not all raw data generated by narrative researchers is in story form, however (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). Rather, as an outcome of the process of narrative analysis, narrative researchers construct stories from descriptive data relating to the phenomena under study (p. 15). According to Polkinghorne, to begin this process, the researcher asks:

questions such as “How did this happen?” or “Why did this come about?” and searches for pieces of information that contribute to the construction of a story that provides an explanatory answer to the questions. (1995, p. 15)

Initially, as I set about data reduction, analysis and interpretation, it was clear to me that, within individual participants’ data sets, “chunks of interview text about particular themes,” meaningful and relevant to the study, figured “importantly and repeatedly” (Riessman, 1993, p. 67). Often, it was apparent that a “theme was worked over, again and again” (p. 67) within an individual’s series of three interviews. My early analysis was inductive (Janesick, 2000, p. 389) and, therefore, concerned with locating these thematic elements, patterns and tensions, and the “narrative threads” or “story lines” interwoven and interconnected throughout the data sets (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 131–133).

In accordance with the understanding that “we live life forwards but understand it backwards” (Josselson, 1995, p. 35), finding “end points” within the data was another analytic strategy that I employed. “The meaning of each event,” according to Polkinghorne:

is produced by the part it plays in the whole episode. The episode needs to include both some end point as well as the contributions that the events and actions made in bringing about or delaying the achievement of that end point. To ask about the meaning or significance of an event is to ask how it contributed to the conclusion of the episode. It is the connections or relationships among events that is their meaning. (1988, p. 6)

Analysis became an “increasingly complex” task, involving reading, and “relentlessly rereading,” the field texts (interview transcripts and observational field notes) of each individual participant, in order to “narratively code” the data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). This process allowed me to become ever more familiar with the data, and therefore attend to its further interpretation.

An interview is considered to be essentially self-communicating; a story contained in itself that requires little additional description or explanation (Kvale, 2001, as cited in Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007, p. 69). According to this view, interpretation is ideally carried out largely during the interview conversation, as the interviewer seeks verification of her interpretations from the interviewee (p. 69). Consequently, I usually asked my participants whether they could confirm my interpretations during interviews. I was loath to force my interpretation upon the data and in this manner appear to claim “to know better than the participants what [they] really thought and meant” (J. Harrison et al., 2001, p. 325).

Clandinin and Connelly argue, however, that no matter how compelling our narrative inquiry field texts are, we need to “fight against our desire to let [them] speak for themselves” (2000, p. 130; see also Gough, 2003, p. 30). Instead, because “our inquiry task is to discover and construct meaning,” they advise that we must go further, and reconstruct our field texts (e.g., field notes and interview transcripts) as research texts (scholarly accounts) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 130). For the purposes of this study, I constructed seven individual biographical narrative accounts from the narrative interpretive-analysis of the data.

Constructing and (re-)presenting the research text

Research texts “grow out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132). In this way, writing, too, can be viewed as an interpretative process (Ezzy, 2002). Indeed, “for many people discovery occurs in writing as much as it does during the tasks of data analysis” (p. 138; see also L. Richardson, 2000, p. 923). And this has proven to be the case in this study. The challenge of writing this research text has created the opportunity for understanding and meaning-making to occur at the point of composition (Britton, 1982).

Once the themes and story lines were identified during the analysis of any single data set, I brought the related sections together (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 27). At first, I retained more detail than absolutely necessary, and then progressively edited out data after making decisions about centrality (Barone, 1992, p. 145), relevance or salience (Barone, 1992, p. 145; Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995, p. 31; Wolcott, 1994, pp. 14–15), and sufficiency (Wolcott, 1994, pp. 14–15). During reduction, however, I took care to preserve participants’ narratives as told; I did not want to fracture or isolate them and thereby lose their meaning by removing important contextual information (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 7; Riessman, 1993, p. 4).

Context

When I set about constructing the individual participants’ narrative accounts, I provided the context – either personal or professional – within which each participant lives or works. Context is “ever present” in narrative thinking, and includes “temporal context, spatial context, and context of other people,” and its inclusion in any research text is essential for meaning-making (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000, p. 32). Indeed, according to Ezzy, “the parts of the story become significant only as they are placed within the context of the whole narrative” (2002, p. 95), which became increasingly apparent as I tried to make clear the elements of my participants’ meaning-making processes during the construction of the narrative accounts.

Vignettes

Within individual narrative accounts, I configured the retained data into vignettes, which, according to Seidman, “alongside each other, provide greater insight and understanding of the topic than any single vignette” (as cited in Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 21). The topic, for the purposes of this study, was each teacher’s personal and professional experience, and the nature of any enduring outcomes, of their participation in a 3-day MESH PD workshop. Each of the vignettes was constructed to provide an insight into the experiences of the individual participants and the meaning that these experiences held for each of them.

In crafting the vignettes, my participants’ data needed to be “shaped to prove specific points” (Tierney, 1997, p. 24). Occasionally, for example, the temporal sequencing of my participants’ narratives has been changed to more closely reflect the chronology of events (Chafe, 1998, p. 284). Yet, the nature of the underlying experience has not been changed during this process (1998).

Voice

“When we write,” writes Richardson, not only do “we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them. As we inscribe their lives, we bestow meaning and promulgate values” (1990, p. 12). For our “language can never be neutral;” it “necessarily imposes a perspective in which things are viewed and a stance toward what we view” (Bruner, 1986, p. 121). Narrative accounts, therefore, must “carry the teacher’s voice if researchers and other observers are to know what a teacher knows or feels. Indeed,” Cortazzi asks, “how can anyone else know what is inside the teacher’s head or heart without the teacher’s commentary?” (1993, p. 11). In line with this view, my writing has remained close to the data (Janesick, 2000) and, importantly, the voices of my teacher participants are heard (Ezzy, 2002; Goodson, 1992b; Schultz, 2006) in each of their individual narrative accounts.

The teachers' voices carry "the tone, the language, the quality, the feelings" of my participants (D. Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992, p. 57), informing readers not only about participants' experiences, but also about their biographies, values, beliefs, concerns and hopes. This attention to the voice of "the other," according to Ezzy, adds to the trustworthiness of the research (2002, p. xiii).

Speech to writing

Attending to voice within the research text, however, necessitates the inclusion of spoken language, and spoken language is inherently messy. For this reason, Elliott believes that it is preferable to "clean" or "sanitise" written texts, because it renders them easier to read, in that the focus can be on content meaning rather than on the confusion of directly transcribed verbal utterances (2005, p. 52). Heeding her advice, I edited my interviewees' spoken language by "adding appropriate punctuation, removing [some] pauses and false starts, and editing out [some of] the messy features of everyday speech" (Richardson, 1985, p. 137 as cited in Elliott, 2005, p. 52). I have also chosen, at times, to edit out "back channel utterances"¹⁰ (Elliott, 2005, p. 56). Consequently, sentences now appear more coherent and more closely resemble written language than in the original telling.

Tensions of re-presentation

There are many varieties of inquiry practiced, and accepted, under the banner of narrative research (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5). Consequently, I often found myself struggling with decisions about re-presentation. According to Clough, it appears that I am not alone in my struggle, for:

the notion that, freed from the restrictive and prescriptive structures in the tradition of academic writing, we can construct our own narrative report in a style of our choosing (and thus with some ease) is a mischief. For while it is (sic) possible to state with some clarity how to structure [a] research report which presents, say, the findings of an experimental study, the narrative form does not render itself so easily to the application of such formulae. (Clough, 2002, p. 8)

The seven biographical narrative accounts, however, are written in such a way as to foreground my participants' voices, thereby giving an understanding of their individual experiences as they each lived through, and reflected upon, a 3-day MESH

PD workshop, under my watchful gaze.

Negotiating the research texts

Towards the end of the research process, I returned to the field to share with my participants the narrative accounts I had written. Uncertain as to the reception my representations would receive, returning to the field and my “first ... and ... most important audience” was always accompanied by enormous “doubt and uncertainty” on my part (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 173).

Before returning to the field, I removed from the narrative accounts all formatting more appropriate to a final text, and printed them to more closely resemble the drafts they were. I considered this approach to be particularly important in my relationship with one participant, Geoff Murray. Geoff had asked me to pause my recording during one interview because he wanted to discuss an issue with me “off the record.” However, I believed that what Geoff had to say on that occasion was germane to the experience of other teachers working in similar contexts. Consequently, I had written this “off the record” data into a vignette that I hoped to include in the research text. I indicated in the margin of the narrative account where I hoped to include the vignette – which I had printed as a separate text – so I could negotiate its inclusion with him (D. Jean Clandinin, personal communication, January 12, 2007). I wanted there to be no misunderstanding: this was a process of negotiation, not one of imposition. I was, quite naturally, pleased when Geoff commented, “Yeah, that’s fine!” about my suggestion to include the piece.

My purpose in returning to the field was to find out how my participants would respond to the texts I had constructed (Mishler, 2004, p. 118). I informed them that the purpose of their reading was for them to be able to respond to the questions: “Is this you? Do you see yourself here?” and, “Is this the character you want to be when this is read by others?” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 148). More important than data verification, this negotiation was a demonstration of my respect for my participants, and I am confident that this process increased the trustworthiness of the study. Participants’ responses to their individual narrative accounts were overwhelmingly positive. Kym Oliver, for example, nodded and smiled her way

¹⁰ For example, those instances when I have used “words such as ‘right’ or utterances such as ‘mmhhmm’ to indicate that the interviewee should continue and is being listened to” (Elliott, 2005, p. 56).

through my re-presentation of her experience and its outcomes, as I synchronised my page-turning with hers. Upon reading her chapter, she said, “That was wicked! I’m rapt!” She asked if she could have a copy¹¹ to take home to her son: “I’ll tell him, I’m Kym and you’re Liam, and just let him read it.” Kath Rivers and I sat together for nearly 2½ hours on the morning that I met with her so she could read her narrative account, as well as the sections of Kym Oliver’s account in which she had featured. A recurring pattern emerged: we would talk and then she would read, laughing aloud when she found that what she had just said in conversation about her beliefs and values was already expressed in the account of our previous conversations. At one point she said, “I should just shut up! Everything I’m saying is already here.” Only one narrative account required some finer negotiation regarding issues such as the participant’s word choice and colloquial language use.

Overall, I found my return to the field and my negotiation of the research texts with my participants to be a powerfully uplifting and affirming researcher experience.



Researcher role

Throughout this chapter, and the narrative accounts, I have illustrated the relationships I built with my participants. In this section, then, I discuss the emotional and spiritual dimensions of narrative inquiry, insider/outsider status, reflexivity, and my role in the research process.

Emotional and spiritual dimensions

Originally, I was unprepared for the extent of the emotional labour involved in processing my research data. Interviews conducted for two earlier research studies left me remarkably ill-equipped for the level of emotional commitment and involvement I experienced in undertaking this inquiry. Often, the MESH group processes were intensely personal and emotional, particularly for participants who had no previous experience of the process, and, consequently, during the interviews there was the occasional expression of deep emotion.

Given “the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8), in hindsight, perhaps I should have been more

¹¹ I left with each participant the copy of “their” account, as a record of their participation in the

prepared for the intense psychological and physical affects that this study would have on me. Instead, because I had previously experienced the support group process and believed that I had coped with the emotionality of it, I felt that I was “in control” of my emotions. I simply did not realise the toll that this research would take on me. Each of the support groups in which I participated was an emotional event in itself. Beyond this, my reflection on the stories I heard, interviewing people about aspects of their personal and professional lives, and writing about participants’ experiences affected me; my emotional state was heightened during the data generation, analysis and writing, and, at times, talking about the particulars of my research made me quite emotional.

I discovered, however, that narrative inquiry, or perhaps qualitative research more generally, can be a highly spiritual experience (Gilbert, 2001, p. 4). Although spirituality has little to do with religious affiliations or beliefs, Rosenblatt asks us to “imagine a religion in which a major sacrament is to listen to strangers talk for several hours about the deepest, hardest, most painful, most challenging experiences of their lives” (Rosenblatt, 2001, p. 113). For Rosenblatt, qualitative interviewing was such an experience. And so it was for me, too, as during support groups and interviews I listened to people talk about matters closest to their hearts. For some, it was the first time they had revealed the experiences they spoke of to anyone, and they talked with obvious and raw emotion. I regularly heard other group participants express the honour and privilege they felt at being trusted to share these stories. For me, the experience was a spiritual happening, and it was this aspect, I believe, that was responsible for my original desire to repeat the group experience, and ultimately called me to research the lived experience of the phenomenon.

Insider/Outsider status

Qualitative approaches to research enable researchers to “‘get under the skin’ of a group ... to find out what really happens – the informal reality which can only be perceived from the inside” (Gillham, 2000, p. 11). Bogdan and Bicklen (1998) name support groups among those “small groups whose members make a purposeful attempt to be inclusive and participatory” (p. 82), and with whom researchers experience the pressure:

study. Each clearly recognised the account as a “snapshot” in time.

for everyone to become a fully-fledged participating member. There is pressure to act like they act. There is the danger that if you hold back they will judge you as critical of what they are doing or saying. Field workers feel guilty being on the margin, especially if they share the values of group members. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, pp. 82–83)

Further, Bogdan and Biklen suggest that “how you participate depends on who you are, your values, and your personality” (1998, p. 83). It has been said that the act of functioning as a helper in an observation situation can prove successful, but adopting such a role may dominate the time spent at the observation site (1998). Additionally, the participant-observer may be defined by other participants in “a particular way” should they choose to become involved in the activities under observation (p. 82).

My interest in the group process began as an outsider, but I quickly became an insider participant-researcher, not only participating in, but also (co-)facilitating, support groups. Sometimes I found it difficult “to maintain both positions – inside and outside the research field” (Rowe, 2003, p. 190), and occasionally took steps to clarify and delineate my dual roles.

Subjectivity and reflexivity

According to Finlay, “although not always referred to explicitly as reflexivity, the *project of examining how the researcher and intersubjective elements impact on and transform research* has been an important part of the evolution of qualitative research” (2003, p. 4).

This exploration of my research process would not be complete without acknowledging the full extent of my subjectivity, or the steps I have taken to examine and disclose the impact of my subjectivity on my research. I need to say that my emotional commitment to this inquiry has been unreserved (Finlay, 2003, p. 8). It was never my intention to remain aloof from my research, or my participants. Indeed, I believe that “subjective researchers cannot separate themselves from the phenomena and people they study” (Toma, 2000, p. 178); narrative inquiry is an intersubjective experience. Perhaps because my participants gave so much of themselves to this research, I was always conscious of not wanting to “stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 62). I much preferred to include elements of my own past and my vulnerabilities in the conversations I was having, and in the text I was creating (2000), insofar as I believed these were relevant (Barone, 1992) and allowed readers

to gain insights into the degree of my subjectivity.

I found myself to be inextricably part of the research process (Mantzoukas, 2004, p. 1000), to the extent that I became “the research instrument” (Gilbert, 2001, p. 4; see also Josselson, 2007; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). In accepting this instrumental view of myself, I acknowledge that data only became significant after their analysis and interpretation by me (Hatch, 2002). My presence throughout the research, therefore, is palpable; my decisions influenced choices about methodology, data generation methods, subject selection, data selection, analysis and interpretation (Finlay, 2003; Gough, 2003). Undoubtedly, “another researcher [would] unfold a different story” (Finlay, 2003, p. 5; see also Gough, 2003, p. 24).

As researchers, “we carry, unavoidably, the limits of our understanding with us,” a critical point made by Bartlett (1992, p. 3). Unravelling what we bring to the research in terms of our own biographies, “our emotions, intuitions, experiences, meanings, values, commitments, presuppositions, prejudices and personal agendas” (Finlay & Gough, 2003, p. 40), biases and baggage, the limitations of understanding and their influence on our data interpretation, is crucial to producing trustworthy qualitative writing (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 331; Finlay, 2003, p. 4; Josselson, 2007, p. 545). To do this requires both “self-knowledge and self-reflection ... to tease out what aspects of what is ‘observed’ derive from the researcher, what from the object of observation (the participant), and what from the interaction between them” (Josselson, 2007, p. 545).

I have attempted to demonstrate the extent of my reflexivity by incorporating useful contextual information, and allowing readers access to my relevant cognitive and affective responses throughout this research text (Gough, 2003, p. 22). Consequently, readers will be able to evaluate for themselves “the adequacy of the methods employed” by me in this study (Stevenson & Cooper, 1997, p. 160).

Leaving the field

Hatch suggests that leaving the field, “is an especially sensitive issue when participants and researchers have formed close bonds” and he describes an abrupt departure from the field as “ethically unacceptable when participants have made themselves vulnerable through close personal contact with researchers” (2002, p. 66). Having developing relationships with my participants, strengthened by the bonding

which occurred during the support group process, it was not easy to leave the field and my participants, and we continue occasional e-mail contact.



Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

I did my utmost to ensure that I protected my participants' identities during the interview, observation, research text writing, and negotiation stages of the research, yet I was unable to *guarantee* them anonymity (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 186). I discovered, too, during my inquiry, that the level of anonymity required by participants varied considerably. At one extreme was Kath Rivers (see Kath's narrative account, p. 93), who "didn't bother" reading the interview transcripts, saying "I don't care. It's fine. Whatever you do with it's cool with me." At the other extreme, however, another participant expressed her/his needs in this way during one interview: "Oh, you'll be very creative. [Laugh]. I'm telling you. You'll be very creative! [Laugh] [Speaking] as your [laugh], as one of the proof-readers. You will be VERY creative." Despite what I interpreted as nervous laughter, I took this request seriously. In such cases, I have modified identifying data within my research text (Seidman, 1991, p. 50), altering inconsequential characteristics of description in order to prevent identification of my participants (Chambliss & Schutt, 2003, p. 186). To do this, I used what Yalom calls "symbolically equivalent substitutes" (1991, p. ix, as cited in Clough, 2002, p. 66) "which maintain the reality, while concealing the identity, of actual people" (Clough, 2002, p. 79) and places. All changes were approved by participants during the negotiation of the biographical narrative accounts.

I am aware that some participants chose to disclose their participation in the research to other members in their MESH group, or to their school staff. Vivienne Deane (see Vivienne's narrative account, p. 230) introduced me to her school staff and told them I was there to interview her for my research. When I returned to the field with the penultimate draft of Kym Oliver's narrative account (see Kym's narrative account, p. 127), she excitedly told two colleagues that her story was going to be in my "book."

My presence in schools, particularly those in which more than one workshop attendee worked, meant that someone may have been able to guess the purpose of my visit. Why, for example, was I visiting one person and not another? I was always

conscious and appreciative of the trust that my participants had placed in me, however, and took measures to uphold what I believed were my ethical, moral and relational responsibilities to them.

Despite my precautions, it is possible that my participants may be recognised by people who know them. Such an eventuality might occur by virtue of their participation in the MESH PD, the nature of stories told during group activities, their teaching positions, my descriptions of them, or their idiosyncratic language use as reported by me (Seidman, 1991, p. 50). However, I believe that such an occurrence is only a remote possibility. Nevertheless, I did remind participants of this risk when I returned to the field to visit each of them in order that they could read their individual narrative accounts prior to publication. In this way, I was able to exceed my explicit contractual obligations to them (Josselson, 2007, p. 539), and each individual narrative account is published with the consent and approval of the participant whose story it tells.



Evaluation criteria

Issues of quality are central to judging the value of all research. Trustworthiness is one overarching standard by which such consideration of quality is made. Trustworthiness refers to the ways in which the research may be judged to be credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 14, 2005a; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the particular approach I have taken in this study, these criteria to increase the trustworthiness of the research were considered throughout the research process (J. Harrison et al., 2001, p. 324).

This section finishes with a brief account of ways in which the worth of the biographical narrative accounts may be evaluated.

Credibility

The act of attending to a study's credibility "refers to the conscious effort to establish confidence in an accurate interpretation of the meaning of the data" (Carboni, 1995, as cited in Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001, p. 530). One technique used to assure credibility is that of engaging with participants over a prolonged period of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), enabling trust to develop between the researcher and

the participants. The involvement of multiple participants, and multiple interviews with individual participants, also offers the possibility for confirmation, corroboration, contradiction and changes within the data, adding to a study's credibility.

In this research, issues of credibility were addressed by using multiple participants, including 56 past participants, nine of whom participated in focus group interviews, seven current participants who were interviewed three times over a 1-year period, the workshop facilitator, and the program founder. Participant verification of transcripts and draft biographical narrative accounts ensured that intersubjective agreement was achieved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2002). Participants were able to verify factual information and "confirm that what was said at the time of the interview was what was really meant, and not said 'in the heat of the moment'" (Denscombe, 1998, p. 133).

As well as these multiple viewpoints, I have one further reference point – my own experience of multiple MESH PD workshops. Prior to, during and after data generation, I participated in and observed many MESH 3-day workshops, and these experiences lend support to the credibility of the data generated in the study.

Crystallization

Historically, researchers have used *triangulation* as a means to improve the validity of studies. Triangulation is the process of using multiple reference points to establish a singular "truth" (Denscombe, 1998; L. Richardson, 2000), and is achieved by using: various data sources (data triangulation), several researchers (investigator triangulation), multiple perspectives (theory triangulation), or multiple methods (methodological triangulation) (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Janesick, 2000).

In post-modern studies, "crystallization" is regarded as a more appropriate design descriptor than triangulation, because the crystal metaphor reflects the multidimensionality of qualitative research which accepts and takes into account a variety and complexity of views (L. Richardson, 2000, p. 934). Therefore, crystallization is adopted here as the most appropriate term for the approach I have taken in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study. To generate data, I have drawn on my own experience, those of past and current participants, the workshop facilitator and program founder, and I have used multiple methods, including survey

by questionnaire, focus group interviews, a series of interviews over a 1-year period, one-off interviews, and observation over 3 days.

Rather than seeking the singular “truth” which is the quarry of positivist researchers, I have sought to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon experienced by MESH workshop participants by eliciting their “multiple perspectives and meanings” (Ely et al., 1997, p. 35). Additionally, I accept that there is potential for shifts in meaning over time, and that some inconsistency within individual narratives is natural (Riessman, 1993, p. 65). Such reflective changes almost certainly emphasise the fact that “memory is selective, shaped, and retold in the continuum of one’s experiences” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 142). Surely, in the study of experience, participants’ perceptions *are* of consequence, and “what *seems* true may be more important than what *is* true” (Burns, 2000, p. 476).

Transferability

The criterion of transferability relates to the extent to which the findings of the study are able to be used within other contexts. The design of most qualitative studies has a focus on particularity, and does not usually attempt to be generalisable (Maxwell, 2002; Seale, 1999). Therefore, the point has been made that, rather than being an issue for researchers, transferability is an issue for readers, who assume the responsibility of deciding whether any study can contribute meaningfully to the contexts of their own study (Burns, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Nevertheless, the researcher bears responsibility for the provision of sufficient descriptive detail to enable judgments of this nature to be made (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and this I have made every effort to do.

My participants were not selected as representative of all participants who attend MESH Support Group Facilitator Training. Instead I was concerned with an in-depth investigation of the lived experience of seven, unique, individual participants. Through prolonged engagement and careful attention to their experiences, I sought to gain “greater insight” (Seidman, 1991, as cited in Polkinghorne, 1995) and achieve “better understanding” (Stake, 2000, p. 437). Readers must make their own judgment regarding whether such conditions as described in this study apply in their own context (Seale, 1999, p. 118).

Dependability

Qualitative researchers aim to produce research texts which are considered dependable. One means of doing this is by providing an “audit trail” which lays open for inspection “the researchers’ documentation of data, methods and decisions made during a project, as well as its end product” (Seale, 1999, p. 45; see also Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The aim is to leave behind “footprints to allow others to judge the utility of the work, and to profit from it” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. x).

Throughout the research text, I have described my decision-making processes so that readers are able to make their own assessment of the dependability of the research.

Confirmability

Any research based on the recollection of a participant within a study is ultimately a study of perceptions, therefore “in valuing the first-person account, one must equally assume certain unknowns” (Huberman, 1993, p. 22). We are, for example, ultimately dependent upon our participants’ memories for their re-creation of events, and these may be unreliable, selective (p. 22) or exaggerated (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1996, p. 1034). One certainty does exist, however; and that is that the data provided by participants are meaningful to them. These data provide opportunities for contemplation, and offer readers the opportunity to internalise the individual stories, reflect upon them, and learn from them. The data, then, “for better or for worse, are the fruit of a rich and complex subjectivity” (Huberman, 1993, p. 23).

Evaluating the biographical narrative accounts

I have taken an “empathic stance” in conducting this research project, one which meant that I was open to discovery rather than seeking to confirm existing understandings or beliefs (Josselson, 1995, p. 30). Throughout this study, I have closely observed and listened to my participants as they shared their experiences with me, and this research text has been an earnest attempt at an honest storytelling (Barone, 1992) of that experience. In judging whether such experience has been satisfactorily captured by a researcher/writer, McAdams uses the criterion of “narrative truth” (McAdams, 1996, p. 314). Narrative truth, in his view, “depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality. Narrative truth is what we have in mind when we say that such and

such is a good story” (p. 314).



Conclusion

As a narrative inquirer, I set out not only to produce a compelling account of my research, but also to tell “a good story.” If I have achieved my aim, readers will have been moved closer to understanding how these teachers have been shaped by both their biographies and their MESH workshop experiences. Hopefully, having read their stories, readers will have connected with my teacher participants both personally and professionally, but ultimately, “as fellow human beings” (Rorty, 1989, as cited in Barone, 1992, p. 142).

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Project

Student Assistance Program and Support Group Facilitator Training

Appendix A

For teachers, administrators, parents, counsellors, youth and family workers
and anyone involved in human services and relationships.

Change learning connectedness optimism drug use smoking

family breakdown anger management bullying

relationships absenteeism crisis intervention behaviour management

grief and loss resilience emotional intelligence hope

Are these issues of concern in your school?

Are you adequately trained and prepared to support students dealing with these issues?

*Would you like to develop a comprehensive program and skills
to address these concerns?*

Would you like to make a good school even better?

Essential Learnings: *Directly addresses key areas of Social Responsibility and Personal Futures.*

The primary focus of the internationally acclaimed *Student Assistance Program and Support Group Facilitator Training* is students and their needs. This Kinder – Adult Learners program prepares educators and other personnel to empower people to deal with these issues in healthy and effective ways.

Hobart
2–4 October 2002

Launceston
16–18 October 2002

Burnie
14–16 November 2002

Past participants say:

This is the best P.D. I've done in my 35 years of professional learning.

Urda Herbst, Northholm Grammar School, Sydney

Our students have developed so much confidence and really appreciate being able to express their thoughts and feelings in the group. It's great to watch them be there for each other and gain so many new skills. We love it!

Sarah Bulkely, MARSSS Teacher, Deloraine High School.

What an amazing experience – personally and professionally! This program (can) make a huge difference in young people's lives.

Julie McClimont, Kangan Batman TAFE, Melbourne.

We are very pleased with the program and receive most positive feedback from students. We thoroughly enjoy it and continue to see such positive outcomes and relationships developing as a result.

Maxine Terry, AP, Brighton Primary.

This program has given me the tools to move on with my life and help others heal too. A profoundly moving experience—it's just wonderful'.

Maggie Peart, Parent, Launceston.

The program is growing strongly in our school and we endorse it unreservedly. We have seen significant benefits for our students and it's wonderful to see their development. The need is evident in the outcomes and the number of students asking to be involved.

Gill Phair, AST3, (formerly) Cressy District High School.

Invigorating for myself on a personal level – empowering and transforming for my students

Carolyn Hamer, Grade 2/3 teacher, Bridport Primary School

It made a huge difference in my own life and I was able to support a positive change in a whole class.

Lindy Zolnierczak, Parent and Chair, Bridport Primary School Council

This is the best training I've ever been to, and I've attended heaps. It's the most effective way I've found to access students 'where they're at'. I've been searching for this for a long time, and it's exactly what I'm looking for. Thank you!

**Jan Adams, Chaplain & Pastoral Care Leader,
Gilmore College for Girls, Western Suburbs, Melbourne**

This is an amazing program – I recommend it to anyone working with students and young people. This sort of support needs to be made available to students everywhere.

Assistant Principal, Tasmania.

Student Assistance Program and Support Group Facilitator Training

Purpose of the Workshop

This intensive 3-day workshop is highly experiential and will teach participants all the skills necessary to set up and facilitate a comprehensive Support Group Program. The three days cover:

- enabling, codependency and intervention,
- communication skills
- drug dependency
- the importance of support groups,
- grief and loss: the healing process,
- child abuse, shame and neglect,
- the basic components of successful programs
- working with children from dysfunctional homes,
- intervention, treatment and recovery,
- suicide & other high risk behaviours

and provide participants with skills to facilitate support groups.

These groups empower students to:

- deal with their situations, thoughts and concerns in a safe environment,
- develop healthy communication skills,
- identify and express feelings appropriately
- learn to treat themselves and others with respect and dignity
- learn that we are responsible for our own lives and based on our choices, have the power to change.

The **Student Assistance Program** addresses and supports students' emotional needs, health and well being. School therefore becomes a far more positive and productive experience.

Purpose of the Program is to

provide a comprehensive primary prevention and early intervention program for all students, Kinder – Adult. The program includes a systematic effort to educate, identify, assess, refer and support students to optimise education, health, well-being and life development.

The Trainer

Nairn Walker is the Australian Coordinator of the Student Assistance Program Training International and Founder of the Mt Arthur Centre, both non profit organisations dedicated to the development and training of community and school-based personnel in support, intervention and development programs that promote and enhance social/emotional health and resiliency and combat risk behaviours.



Nairn introduced the Student Assistance Program to Australia in 1997 and since then, has trained extensively with the program's creator, Cheryl Watkins, MA. Together, they are responsible for the establishment of Student Assistance Support Groups in many schools and community agencies around Tasmania and in the greater Melbourne and Sydney regions.

Nairn has been professionally involved in Education and Community Development in Tasmania in many different capacities over the last ten years. She has worked as a teacher, administrator and consultant in Primary, High and Senior Secondary Colleges around the state, as well as lecturing in the School of Education at the University of Tasmania. She is currently undertaking further study in Psychology, is Tasmanian Trainer for ASG 'You Can Do It!' Education (Program Achieve) and provides educational consultancy services across a broad range of issues.

For further information

Please contact **Maggie Peart** at the
Mt Arthur Centre on 6395 1201 or
phone Nairn Walker on 6328 1287 -
0419 306 331
Email: StAssisProgram@hotmail.com

Conference Details

Venues, Dates & Times...

**Oct 2 - 4, 2002 – Bowen Support
Services**, 223 Clarence St, Howrah.

Oct 14 - 16, 2002 – Mt Arthur Centre,
50 Whites Mill Rd, Lilydale.

Nov 14 - 16, 2002 – Hellyer College,
Mooreville Road, Burnie.

8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily.

Investment Details...

Normally \$495...

\$395 registration per person*

*Generously underwritten by CATI International.

Includes:

- Comprehensive Training Manual
- Certificate of Completion for 27 hours
- All Morning and Afternoon teas.

Cancellation Policy:

\$100 administrative fee will be charged for cancellation within 2 weeks. Transfers may be arranged.

Payment can be made by cheque, postal or purchase order to **Social Solutions**.

ABN: 45 431 099 825 – Not registered for GST.

Mail to: StAssis Program
PO Box 1241, Launceston, Tas
7250.

Fax to: 03 6328 1287 or

Email to: StAssisProgram@hotmail.com.

Accommodation: please contact us for details.

REGISTRATION FORM

Student Assistance Program and Support Group Facilitator Training

Name..... Employer

Work Address.....

.....

Position..... Phone ()

Email Fax ()

Please send registration form and cheque/money/purchase order as per details above,
or registration may be

☐ Hobart

☐ Launceston

☐ Burnie

Enclosed:

☐ \$395 per person

☐ Chq/ Money/Purchase Order # _____

Reader's guide to the biographical narrative accounts

Writers use changes of font to indicate different things to a reader. Barone, for example, changes fonts to “signal shifts across three distinct perspectives of events and sources of information” (Barone, 2001, p. 70). In the biographical narrative accounts, I have used different font styles/faces and icons to indicate the following shifts in the text:

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| This font | represents my own voice, as researcher, active participant observer, writer and narrator of the text. Additionally, I have embedded some material paraphrased from participants' interviews in the narrated text in order to adhere as closely as possible to my participants' voices throughout the narrative accounts. As an example of this, in my first interview with Kath Rivers she said, “the germ's starting to kind of fester there.” This has been incorporated into her narrative account as: “the germ of an idea started to fester.” |
| <i>This font</i> | represents my participants' voices. This text is direct quotation taken from transcribed interview data. |
| UPPER CASE | indicates modulatory emphasis or stress. |
| <i>[Brackets]</i> | indicate the addition of words or phrases to clarify meaning. |
| ◆ ◆ ◆ | represents a distinct break between vignettes. Each vignette has been given a heading representative of its theme or topic. Most headings are quotations excerpted from participants' interview data (indicated with quotation marks). |
| ◆ ◆ ◆ | represents a smaller break within a topic, often indicating the passage of time between one interview and the next. |



MESH* Mental Emotional Social and Spiritual Health

Support Group Facilitator Training Schedule

Day One

7.30 – 8.00 Check in & registration
 8.00 – 9.00 Introductions & logistics
 9.00 – 10.00 MESH* Program Overview
 10.00 – 10.15 Break
 10.15 – 11.15 Addictions & Co-Dependency
 11.15 – 11.45 Importance of Support Groups
 11.45 – 1.00 **Group A: Personal History** (C54)
 1.00 – 2.00 LUNCH
 2.00 – 3.00 The Basics of Group: Feelings, Defences & Family Rules
 3.00 – 3.15 Phases of Group I and II, & The Role of the Facilitator
 3.15 – 3.30 Break
 3.30 – 3.45 Group Communication Skills
 3.45 – 5.00 **Group B: Feelings** (C56)

Day Two

8.00 – 9.15 **Group C: Defences** (C58)
 9.15 – 9.30 Break
 9.30 – 10.30 Child Abuse, Neglect & Shame
 10.30 – 11.45 **Group D: Family Rules** (C60)
 11.45 – 12.30 LUNCH
 12.30 – 1.30 Support Group Implementation
 1.30 – 2.15 Grief and Loss: The Healing Process
 2.15 – 3.30 **Group E: Control** (C62)
 3.30 – 3.45 Break
 3.45 – 4.45 Children of Dysfunctional Families
 4.45 – 5.00 Affirmations

Day Three

8.00 – 9.00 Youth Suicide/Crisis Plan
 9.00 – 10.15 **Group F: Feedback** (C65)
 10.15 – 10.30 Break
 10.30 – 10.45 Phases of Group: III and IV
 10.45 – 10.50 Energiser
 10.50 – 11.45 Enabling, Intervention & Recovery
 11.45 – 12.45 LUNCH
 12.45 – 2.00 **Group G: Forgiveness** (C67)
 2.00 – 2.15 Break
 2.15 – 3.00 Program Implementation Strategies & Action plan
 3.00 – 3.30 Healthy Families
 3.30 – 5.00 **Group H: Closing** (C70)

SAPS/MESH Support Group Facilitator Training

Support Group Purposes and Guidelines

Purposes

1. To provide a safe place for you to share your feelings, your thoughts, and your concerns.
2. To learn to identify and express your feelings appropriately.
3. To learn healthy communication skills.
4. To learn to treat ourselves and others with respect and dignity.
5. To learn we are responsible for our own lives and, based on our choices, have the power to change.

Guidelines

1. Confidentiality – “What is said in group stays in group.”
2. All beliefs are respected.
3. No “put-downs” to self or others.
4. Everyone has the right to pass.
5. Everyone participates even if it’s in his or her own head.
6. Be on time.
7. Come to group free of mind-altering chemicals.
8. Everyone speaks for him or herself – use “I statements.”

Southern Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)
APPLICATION APPROVAL

To: Dr Margaret Barrett & Ms Tammy Jones (PhD)
School of Education
University of Tasmania
Private Bag 1307 LAUNCESTON

From: Amanda McAully (Executive Officer)

Date: 19 May 2004

Subject: H7795: Support Group facilitator training.


The Southern Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee has recommended approval of this project. You are required to report immediately anything that might affect ethical acceptance of the project, including:

- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants;
- proposed changes in the protocol;
- unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

You are also required to inform the Committee if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion, giving the reasons for discontinuation.

Approval is subject to annual review. Please submit your first report on this project by 5 May 2005. The Annual report form can be found on our website
<http://www.research.utas.edu.au/rdo/ethics/human.htm>

Please Note: If research on the project has finished, please complete the above form selecting the "Final Report" option, and return as soon as possible for audit purposes.


Amanda McAully (Executive Officer)

University of Tasmania
Research and Development Office
Private Bag 1 Hobart Tas 7001
Ph: 6226 2763
Fax: 6226 2765
Amanda.McAully@utas.edu.au

MEMORANDUM

Private Bag 01 Hobart
Tasmania 7001 Australia
Telephone (03) 6226 2764
Facsimile (03) 6226 7148
Marilyn.Knott@utas.edu.au
<http://www.research.utas.edu.au/index.htm>



HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (TASMANIA) NETWORK

AMENDMENT TO EXISTING APPLICATION APPROVAL

3 July 2006

AssocProf Margaret Barrett
Education
Private Bag 1307
Launceston

H7795: Support group facilitator training

Dear AssocProf Barrett

The Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee has approved the Amendment to the above project on 3/7/2006.

Amendment description:

One further participant to study - proposed interview (audio recorded) with founder of Support Group Facilitator Training workshops.

Yours sincerely

for Ethics Executive Officer

A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



_____, 2004.

Dear [name of past participant],

Letter of Introduction – Tammy Jones

I am pleased to write to you introducing Tammy Jones, who is, like yourself, a former participant in Support Group Facilitator Training. Some of you may have already met Tammy through various group training sessions she has attended in the past year.

Tammy has sought my support in undertaking doctoral research into Support Group Facilitator Training. As I anticipate that this research will be valuable in furthering knowledge of the impact of the program, I am happy to endorse the research project.

I enclose herewith a letter and information sheet from Tammy introducing her research project, together with a questionnaire, and it is my hope that you will give your consideration to participating in her research.

All the best,

Nairn Walker.

_____, 2004.

Dear Past Participant,

Support Group Facilitator Training

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project that aims to further our understanding of the impact of Support Group Facilitator Training on professional work lives.

This research study forms part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and will be conducted under the supervision of Associate Professor Margaret Barrett.

The research will be conducted in several phases. Phase 1 of the study involves past participants in Support Group Facilitator Training.

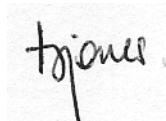
As a past participant, you may take part in the study in two different ways. You may choose to:

1. Complete and return the enclosed anonymous **questionnaire**. The questionnaire investigates aspects of your decision to attend training and your perceptions of that training. If you wish to write more than the space allocated on the questionnaire allows then please feel free to attach an extra sheet. Please return the completed questionnaire to me in the enclosed reply paid envelope by **Friday, 23rd July, 2004**.
2. Participate in a **focus group interview**. The focus group interview allows for further exploration of past participants' perceptions of the impact of Support Group Facilitator Training on their professional work lives. If you choose to consider taking part in a focus group interview, you need to complete the enclosed form and return it in the second reply paid envelope. I anticipate that focus group interviews will be conducted in each region of the state during August or September, 2004.

Please be aware that if you choose to send back both forms in the same envelope you will be potentially identifiable, however completed questionnaires and indications of willingness to participate in focus group interviews will be stored separately.

Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Yours faithfully,



Tammy Jones,
Researcher.

Assoc. Prof. Margaret Barrett,
Chief Investigator.

_____, 2004.

INFORMATION SHEET

Title of investigation

Support Group Facilitator Training.

Name of chief investigator

This is a study being conducted by Tammy Jones as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, under the supervision of Associate Professor Margaret Barrett (the Chief Investigator).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to investigate participants' perceptions of the impact of participation in Support Group Facilitator Training on their professional work lives. Ms Nairn Walker of Social Solutions has given her permission for me to undertake the study.

Benefits of the research

The benefits of the study may include a greater understanding of:

- the work lives of professionals in an educational setting;
- the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health support needs of professionals in an educational setting;
- the preparedness of education professionals to meet the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health support needs of school students;

and provide recommendations:

- that may serve to guide teachers in engaging students with the Personal Futures component of Tasmania's Essential Learnings curriculum, and
- for curriculum development within teacher education programs.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

You have been identified as a potential participant within this phase of the study due to your past participation in a three-day Support Group Facilitator Training professional development course.

Study procedures

You may participate in the study, in two different ways. You may choose to:

1. Complete and return the enclosed anonymous **questionnaire**. The questionnaire investigates aspects of your decision to attend training and your perceptions of that training. If you wish to write more than the space allocated on the questionnaire

allows then please feel free to attach an extra sheet. Please return the completed questionnaire to me in the enclosed reply paid envelope by **Friday, 23rd July, 2004**.

2. Participate in a **focus group discussion**. The focus group discussion allows for further exploration, with other past participants', of your perceptions of the impact of Support Group Facilitator Training on your professional work lives. This discussion will be audio taped. It is anticipated that the discussion will last between sixty and ninety minutes. If you choose to consider taking part in a focus group discussion, you need to complete the enclosed form and return it in the second reply paid envelope. I anticipate that focus group interviews will be conducted in each region of the state during August or September, 2004.

Please be aware that if you choose to send back both forms in the same envelope, you will be potentially identifiable, however completed questionnaires and indications of willingness to participate in a focus group discussion will be stored separately.

Confidentiality

Questionnaire

All research data gathered through the questionnaire will be anonymous and all data collected will be treated as strictly confidential by the researcher.

Focus Group Discussion

All research data gathered during the focus group discussion will be treated as strictly confidential by the researcher. Any information pertaining to your identity will be removed from the data during processing and will only be seen by myself. Once any information concerning your identity has been removed, my supervisor will have access to discussion transcripts. You will have the opportunity to peruse the transcripts of the discussion in order that you may correct, edit, modify or withdraw data.

The importance of confidentiality will be stressed to all participants in the focus group discussion. All participants will sign a Consent Form whereby they agree to maintain the identity of other group members and respect the privacy of any information that may be disclosed. However, the researcher cannot guarantee that individuals will honour confidentiality.

General

All completed questionnaires, tapes, transcripts and computer files will be kept in a locked cabinet or password-protected computer at the University of Tasmania for a minimum of five (5) years after the completion of the study and then deleted or destroyed by shredding. For the purposes of the publication of the study, you will be referred to by a pseudonym, which you are free to suggest yourself, if you prefer. Files which cross-reference identifying data and pseudonyms will be securely kept separately.

Possible risks or discomforts

Questionnaire

The investigators do not perceive that you will suffer any risk associated with the completion of the questionnaire.

Focus Group Discussion

The discussion will be conducted with sensitivity and dignity. It is not anticipated that your participation in the study will cause you any risk, however, although unlikely, emotional distress or embarrassment may occur as a result of your

participation in the study. At any time, you may choose to leave for either a period of time or for the remainder the discussion. You will be offered the opportunity to debrief with the program facilitator in the first instance, or be referred to your workplace counselling service or staff support unit if this issue becomes significantly problematic for you.

Freedom to refuse or withdraw

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

Questionnaire

By completing and returning the questionnaire you are choosing to participate in the study. Due to the anonymous nature of the data gathered, the investigators are unable to comply with any request to withdraw data once it is received.

Focus Group Discussion

If you decide to take part in the focus group discussion and subsequently change your mind about participating, you are free to withdraw at any time without effect or explanation. You may also choose to withdraw any data supplied to the date of withdrawal.

Statement regarding approvals

This project has received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network.

Contact persons

If you have any general concerns, please contact my supervisor, Associate Professor Margaret Barrett (phone #####) or myself, Tammy Jones (phone #####), during business hours.

Concerns or complaints

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints, please contact the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network, Amanda McAully (phone 6226 2763).

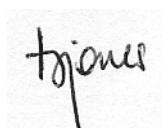
Results of investigation

At your request, you will be kept informed of any significant findings that may affect you, and, upon completion of the study, receive a copy of the final overall results.

Information sheet

You may keep this information sheet.

Thank you for your participation in, and support of, this study.



Tammy Jones,
Researcher.

Assoc. Prof. Margaret Barrett,
Chief Investigator.

Do you feel that you benefited from participating in Support Group Facilitator Training?

☐ yes

☐ no

☐ unsure

If you answered yes to the previous question, was this benefit:

☐ personal

☐ professional

☐ both personal and professional

Please describe the benefits.

Please describe what you felt was the **most powerful aspect** of the training?

Please describe what you felt was the **most difficult aspect** of the training?

What aspects of the program, if any, have you implemented?

- ☐ facilitated support groups
- ☐ applied insights, understandings or knowledge gained in professional interactions and/or relationships
- ☐ applied particular skills, strategies or tools in professional work
- ☐ used information gained to change approach and/or policy in workplace
- ☐ other: _____

Please comment on the value of these aspects:

This section collects some demographic information

I am a ☐ female ☐ male

I am ☐ under 18 years ☐ 19-25 years ☐ 26-40 years ☐ 41-55 years ☐ over 55 years young

I am a parent ☐ yes ☐ no

Please feel free to give further or more extensive answers, explanations or comments below or on a separate sheet.

Thanks!


This section addresses your willingness to participate in a focus group interview

☐ I am happy to participate in a focus group interview with other past participants in order to discuss my perceptions of my participation in Support Group Facilitator Training, provided that the place and timing of the interview are suitable to me.

My name is _____, and I can be contacted by:

☐ telephone

(03) _____ (home). The best time to contact me is _____.

(03) _____ (work). The best time to contact me is _____.

☐ e-mail

☐ post

This section addresses your willingness to participate in a focus group interview

☐ I am happy to participate in a focus group interview with other past participants in order to discuss my perceptions of my participation in Support Group Facilitator Training, provided that the place and timing of the interview are suitable to me.

My name is _____, and I can be contacted by:

☐ telephone

(03) _____ (home). The best time to contact me is _____.

(03) _____ (work). The best time to contact me is _____.

☐ e-mail

☐ post

This section addresses your willingness to participate in a focus group interview

☐ I am happy to participate in a focus group interview with other past participants in order to discuss my perceptions of my participation in Support Group Facilitator Training, provided that the place and timing of the interview are suitable to me.

My name is _____, and I can be contacted by:

☐ telephone

(03) _____ (home). The best time to contact me is _____.

(03) _____ (work). The best time to contact me is _____.

☐ e-mail

☐ post

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Support Group Facilitator Training

Turn on tape and digital audio recorders.

Introduction

Firstly, I'd like to welcome you all to the group.

I realise you're all very busy and I thank you all for coming today. My research, which is part of my doctoral studies, seeks to investigate your perceptions of the impact of the participation, of your participation in Support Group Facilitator Training on your work life, but please feel free to talk about anything else related to the MESH workshop that you would like to.

Guidelines and instructions

I need to inform you of the guidelines for this discussion before we begin. Firstly, I'm sure you'll all understand the need to maintain the confidentiality of the people here and anything that is said during the discussion. I hope you'll feel free to discuss the topic broadly according to your personal perspectives and experiences. If you have a different perspective from that raised by others, I'm sure we'd all be interested to hear. I'll be taping the discussion and will be transcribing our conversation myself. I'll change identifying details during transcription so that you and your schools are unidentifiable. In the results of my study there will be no generalisation of your perceptions to all participants of Support Group Facilitator Training. If you'd like to receive a copy of findings please let me know and I'll arrange for that to happen.

You have in front of you a notepad and pencil. Please feel free to make notes about anything you'd like to comment on as our discussion gets going.

Group member introductions

I'd like us to begin by introducing ourselves to the group. Please tell us your name, something about yourself, when you attended MESH and one thing you learned about yourself through MESH, if anything.

Wait for group members to introduce themselves.

Now, a bit about me. My name is Tammy Jones. I attended MESH at the end of 2002. ...

Questions raised in questionnaire responses

There were several issues that were brought up in the responses I received to the questionnaire you all responded to, and I'd like to discuss several of these today.

One issue raised was the level of concern among respondents for students' welfare and the increasing "welfare role" of teachers, and related professionals, in schools. How much of an issue is this and how well prepared do you think teachers and related professionals are, generally, to deal with students' mental, emotional, social and spiritual health needs?

People perceived differing levels of support in dealing with students' mental, emotional, social and spiritual health needs. How has this issue affected you and what you'd like to achieve with students?

Many respondents felt that by participating in MESH they came to understand themselves and others better. Can you think of instances where MESH has helped you to understand yourself, students, colleagues and others?

Several people mentioned colleagues, either as a source of support or of conflict in their work. Has MESH made a difference to the way you interact with colleagues at school?

Or with parents?

Some of you may have disclosed some personal, intimate or traumatic issues during the support group process. Without asking you to discuss what you disclosed, I'm interested in anything you have to say about the nature, value or lack thereof of self-disclosure as you experienced in the support group context of your training. For example, upon reflection was it a good thing to do? Did it make you feel differently about what you disclosed or about yourself?

Has the group process made it easier for you to discuss issues since then?

Listening to the stories shared by others was something that had an impact on many people who replied to the questionnaire. How did listening to other people's stories affect you both in the short and long term?

Have you ever experienced any other PD programs that covered similar issues to the MESH workshop, and if so, how were they different or the same?

In what ways has your MESH experience changed you or how you see your role as a teacher, if at all?

What do you think are some of the enduring outcomes of your participant in MESH?

Did you have anything else you wanted to discuss in relation to MESH that I haven't already asked about?

Closing thanks

I hope you found the discussion interesting and worthwhile. Thank you for your participation and for sharing so openly. Please let me know if you wish to receive a copy of the findings of my study.

FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

Support Group Facilitator Training



1. I have read and understood the *Information Sheet* for this study.
2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
3. I understand that my participation in this phase of the study involves me in taking part in a focus group discussion of approximately 1 to 1½ hours duration which will be audio taped. I understand that I can request a copy of the discussion transcript and that I will be able to correct, edit, modify or withdraw data contributed by me as I see fit.
4. I understand that, while the risk is minimal, there is a possibility of my experiencing emotional or psychological distress as a result of my participation in the study, and that, at any time during the discussion, I may choose to leave the discussion. I am also aware that I will be referred to my workplace counselling service if this issue becomes significantly problematic for me.
5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for a minimum period of five years, and after that minimum time, and when no longer required, all data will be destroyed.
6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published, provided that I cannot be identified as a participant.
8. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential by the researcher and that any information I supply to the researcher will be used only for the purposes of the research.
9. I agree to maintain the confidentiality of the other individuals present at the discussion and to respect the privacy of any information that they may disclose.
10. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and, if I so wish, may request that any personal data gathered be withdrawn from the research.

Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

Statement by Investigator:

11. I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

Name of investigator _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

_____, 2004.

Dear [name of intending participant],

Letter of Introduction – Tammy Jones

I am pleased to write to you introducing Tammy Jones, who is a former participant in **MESH Support Group Facilitator Training**, the workshop in which you recently enrolled.

Tammy has sought my support in undertaking doctoral research into MESH Support Group Facilitator Training. As I anticipate that this research will be valuable in furthering knowledge of the impact of the program, I am happy to endorse her research.

I enclose herewith a letter and information sheet from Tammy introducing her research project, and it is my hope that you will give your consideration to participating in a series of interviews with Tammy in order to inform her research.

As **the first interview needs to be conducted prior to your attendance at the workshop** at _____ beginning on _____ Tammy would be pleased to hear from you as soon as possible in order that she may answer any queries you may have, and/or arrange an appropriate time for an interview, should you consider participating in her study.

All the best,



Nairn Walker,
Australian Coordinator,
MESH Support Group Facilitator Training.

_____, 2004.

Dear MESH Participant,

Support Group Facilitator Training

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project that aims to further our understanding of the impact of MESH Support Group Facilitator Training on professional work lives.

The research study forms part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and will be conducted under the supervision of Associate Professor Margaret Barrett.

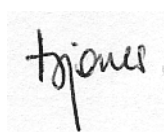
I am asking that you give consideration to being involved in a series of three interviews with me. It is anticipated that each interview will take between sixty and ninety minutes. **The first of these interviews would be scheduled to take place a day or two prior to your attendance at the three-day workshop (beginning _____),** and would be arranged in order to suit your schedule. The second interview would take place within a few days of your completion of the workshop, and the third interview approximately three to four months from that time.

Ms Nairn Walker of Social Solutions has given her permission for me to undertake the study.

I ask that you give consideration to your participation in the study, and I have enclosed herewith an *Information Sheet* and a sample *Consent Form*, which further details the research. If you wish to know more about the study, or if you choose to participate, please contact me, Tammy Jones, on ##### during business hours, or on ##### of an evening, or on my mobile ##### at any time.

Thank you for giving your consideration to participation in this study.

Yours faithfully,



Tammy Jones,
Researcher.

Assoc. Prof. Margaret Barrett,
Chief Investigator.

_____, 2004.

INFORMATION SHEET

Title of investigation

Support Group Facilitator Training

Name of chief investigator

This is a study being conducted by myself, Tammy Jones, in conjunction with my supervisor, Associate Professor Margaret Barrett, as part of the requirements for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to investigate participants' perceptions of the impact of participation in MESH Support Group Facilitator Training on their professional work lives. Ms Nairn Walker of Social Solutions has given her permission for me to undertake the study.

Benefits of the research

The benefits of the study may include a greater understanding of:

- the work lives of professionals in an educational setting;
- the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health support needs of professionals in an educational setting;
- the preparedness of education professionals to meet the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health support needs of school students;

and recommendations:

- that may serve to guide teachers in engaging students with the Personal Futures component of Tasmania's Essential Learnings curriculum, and
- for teacher education programs.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

You have been identified as a potential participant within this study due to your participation in an upcoming MESH Support Group Facilitator Training professional development course.

Study procedures

Should you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in three semi-structured in-depth interviews that will be audio taped, and to journal your perceptions of the program at the end of each of the three days.

It is anticipated that each interview will last between one hour and one and a half hours, with the first interview taking place before your participation in the training workshop. The scheduling and purposes of each interview and the journal are described below.

- **Interview 1 – Prior to attendance at a MESH training workshop**

The purpose of this interview is to explore your existing knowledge of the program, your reason for attending, your perceptions of the mental, emotional, social and spiritual needs of people working and studying in an educational setting, and the outcome you wish to achieve by attending;

- **Journal writing – After each of the three days of MESH training workshop**

The purpose of the journal is to record your immediate response to each of the three days of your attendance at the MESH training workshop. The journal is for your reference only, but you may wish to refer to it during subsequent interviews to inform your response.

- **Interview 2 – Immediately after attending a MESH training workshop**

The purpose of this interview is to explore your immediate perceptions of your experience of the program, how you feel it may or may not have met your expectations and needs, any benefits you attribute to the program, and your intentions (or not) for its use in your work.

- **Interview 3 – 3-6 months after attending a MESH training workshop**

The purpose of this interview is to explore the lasting impression that the program may or may not have had on you and on your work.

Confidentiality

All research data will be treated as strictly confidential. Any information pertaining to your identity will be removed from the data during processing and will only be seen by myself. Once any information concerning your identity has been removed, my supervisor will have access to interview transcripts. You will have the opportunity to peruse the transcripts of the interviews in order that you may correct, edit, modify or withdraw data.

All tapes, transcripts and computer files will be kept in a locked cabinet or password-protected computer at the University of Tasmania for a minimum of five (5) years after the completion of the study and then deleted or destroyed by shredding. For the purposes of the publication of the study, you will be referred to by a pseudonym, which you are free to suggest yourself, if you prefer.

Possible risks or discomfort and risk mitigation

The interviews will be conducted with sensitivity and dignity. It is not anticipated that your participation in the study will cause you any risk, however, although unlikely, emotional distress or embarrassment may occur as a result of your participation in the study. At any time during an interview, you may ask for the

interview to stop. You will be referred to your workplace counselling service or staff support unit if this issue becomes significantly problematic for you.

Freedom to refuse or withdraw

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part in the study and subsequently change your mind about participating, you are free to withdraw at any time without effect or explanation. You may also choose to withdraw any data supplied to the date of withdrawal.

Statement regarding approvals

This project has received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network and the Department of Education.

Contact persons

If you have any general concerns, please contact my supervisor, Associate Professor Margaret Barrett – Phone (03) ##### – or myself, Tammy Jones – Phone (03) ##### – during business hours.

Concerns or complaints

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints, please contact the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network, Amanda McAully – Phone (03) 6226 2763.

Results of investigation

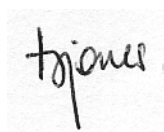
At your request, you will be able to view your own personal data, be kept informed of any significant findings that may affect you, and, upon completion of the study, receive a copy of the final overall results.

Information sheet

You may keep this *Information Sheet* and a copy of the *Participant Consent Form*.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in, and support of, this study.

Yours faithfully,



Tammy Jones,
Researcher.

Assoc. Prof. Margaret Barrett,
Chief Investigator.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Support Group Facilitator Training

1. I have read and understood the *Information Sheet* for this study.
2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
3. I understand that the study involves a series of three semi-structured in-depth interviews of 60 to 90 minutes duration which will be audio recorded. I understand that the interviews will take place over a period of approximately three to six months. I understand I will be supplied with a copy of interview transcripts and that I will be able to correct, edit, modify or withdraw data as I see fit.
4. I understand that, while the risk is minimal, there is a possibility of my experiencing emotional or psychological distress as a result of my participation in the study, and that, at any time during an interview, I may ask for the interview to stop. I am also aware that I will be referred to my workplace counselling service or staff support unit if this issue becomes significantly problematic for me.
5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for a minimum period of five years, and after that minimum time, and when no longer required, all data will be destroyed.
6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published, provided that I cannot be identified as a participant.
8. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential and that any information I supply to the researcher will be used only for the purposes of the research.
9. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and, if I so wish, may request that any personal data gathered be withdrawn from the research.

Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

Statement by Investigator:

10. I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

Name of investigator _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

INTERVIEW GUIDE 1

Support Group Facilitator Training

Introduction	<i>Now that you've read through the information letter, and we've signed the consent form, I'd like to thank you for taking part in this study. I'll begin by asking...</i>
Section 1	How were you first introduced to MESH Support Group Facilitator Training, and what had you heard, if anything, about the training?
Prompts:	By receiving a flyer Through a recommendation by a colleague, friend or respected other Through my principal or employer
Section 2	What was your reason for planning to attend MESH training?
Prompts:	The comments in flyer "spoke" to you You have concerns for students Your prior knowledge of the program The need to increase number of teachers within your school who can facilitate groups Your quest for further skill development Out of a need survival skills / desperation
Section 3	Can you describe your current work situation and position, what led you to this career, and how you feel about your work?
Prompts:	Your current position Your past position/s Your qualification/s Your reasons for choosing, or your path to, your current profession Likes, dislikes and challenges of current profession/position
Section 4	Can you tell me about your knowledge of issues affecting students' mental, emotional, social and spiritual health needs, and your ability to cope with related issues?
Prompts:	Issues you see in your class or school (lack of communication, family breakdown and dysfunction, gambling, abuse, alcohol-related issues, suicide, etc.) Issues you see in the community in general (same list as above) Your perceptions of your ability to cope with students' needs
Section 5	Can you tell me about your perceptions of the preparation, and preparedness, of school staff to deal with students' mental, emotional, social and spiritual health needs?
Prompts:	Training during your teacher preparation Training through professional development Skills developed during your previous or current employment Through personal life experiences (e.g. family, outside interests or activities) Through curriculum initiatives (e.g. Essential Learnings) Opportunities to debrief with other staff or supporting professionals
Section 6	What do you hope for as an outcome from your participation in Support Group Facilitator Training?
Prompts:	Your expectations of course content (for self, class, and/or school) Your expectations of course experience (for self)
Close	<i>I'd like to thank you for your participation in this interview. During the 3-day training workshop, I'll make arrangements with you regarding further interviews.</i>

INTERVIEW GUIDE 2

Support Group Facilitator Training

- Introduction** *Now that you've had a chance to participate in a three-day MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshop, I'd like to discuss your perceptions of the program. You don't need to show me your journal; however you may refer to it at any time during the interview. I'd like to begin by asking...*
- Section 1** **What is your initial reaction to MESH training generally?**
Prompts: Your general impressions of the MESH program
The fit with your expectations
- Section 2** **What are your perceptions of your experience of the MESH group process?**
Prompts: Your initial reaction to participation in a group
Fit with interviewee's expectations
Your experience of sharing your story and sharing the stories of others
- Section 3** **Can you tell me if you learnt anything about yourself, or how you relate to others?**
Prompts: Your experience of giving and receiving feedback
The defences you use
Your public mask – comparing our inners to the others' outers
- Section 4** **Can you tell me if you learnt anything about the nature of people, or how they relate to you?**
Prompts: The defences they use
The use of public masks
- Section 5** **Can you tell me about your perceptions of the value to you of the information delivered during the lecturettes?**
Prompts: Fit with your previous understanding or a change in previous perceptions
Relationship to your current/future work situation(s)
Your relationships with students and/or staff
- Section 6** **At this stage, do you anticipate using the information, knowledge or skills gained during training, and how do you see yourself doing this?**
Prompts: As part of your issue management strategies in your class or workplace
By running support groups (alone or with support staff)
In building relationships with students, staff and parents
- Section 7** **What did you consider were the most helpful aspects of MESH to you or your work?**
Prompts: Lecturettes (e.g. learning about issues, family sculpture)
Participation in the support group process
Support of facilitator or other group members
Your realisation about some aspect of your teaching or relationships
- Section 8** **What did you consider were the most difficult aspects of MESH?**
Prompts: Sharing your story or listening to the stories of others
Your realisation about some aspect of your teaching or relationships
- Section 9** **Would you recommend MESH to a friend or colleague, and why?**
- Close** *Thanks so much for your sharing your thoughts with me. If there's anything else you'd like to add please feel free to do so, then we'll make arrangements for a follow-up interview in a few months time.*

INTERVIEW GUIDE 3

Support Group Facilitator Training

- Introduction** *It's now some [state number of months] months since you participated in MESH Support Group Facilitator Training; I'd like to discuss any lasting impressions of MESH. I'll begin by asking...*
- Section 1** **Can you tell me what memories you have of your training in the MESH program?**
Prompts: The group process (or any particular aspect thereof)
The lecturettes (or any particular section thereof)
The other participants
The facilitator
- Section 2** **How do you feel about the MESH program now that some time has elapsed since your participation in the training?**
Prompts: All very good at the time, but you don't give it much thought now
Memories come back to you sometimes when dealing with students, staff members or parents
Holds a special place in your memory
- Section 3** **What was the best thing about your participation in the training?**
Prompts: The strategies or skills you gained
A better understanding of the issues that students or staff are dealing with
A better understanding of yourself
- Section 4** **Did you change any of your work practices because of your participation in the training, and how would you describe this change, if any?**
Prompts: Implemented groups or some aspects of the group process
- Section 5** **Have you changed the way in which you deal with student, staff or parent issues because of your participation in the training, and how would you describe this change, if any?**
Prompts: Developed better listening skills
Developed a better understanding of the defences people use
Developed a better understanding of the issues that people are dealing with
- Section 6** **Did you talk about the training with colleagues or friends, what aspects did you talk about, and why?**
Prompts: The information given in the lecturettes
The group process
- Section 7** **Has it been difficult to maintain the confidentiality of the group, and why?**
- Section 8** **Have you kept in touch with any other member of the group, and, if so, why?**
Prompts: You found you shared a similar history
You found that for an unknown reason you felt close to this person
- Section 9** **Did you recommend that a friend or colleague undertake training, and why?**
- Close** *Thank you again for helping me with this research. As I did after the other interviews, I'll be sending the transcripts of this interview to you for you to check. Let me know if you'd like to receive a copy of the final report, and I'll make sure that you get a copy.*

_____, 2006.

Dear Nairn,

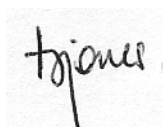
Support Group Facilitator Training

Thank you for your participation in our conversations over the past years regarding research on MESH Support Group Facilitator Training being conducted as part of the requirements for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy by me under the supervision of Associate Professor Margaret Barrett.

This is a formal invitation for you to take part in this research, and I enclose herewith an *Information Sheet* detailing the project and the nature of your participation therein. Also enclosed please find a *Consent Form*, which needs to be signed by us both prior to your participation in the interview process.

I value the time that you have taken thus far in discussing this project, and thank you for your continuing support.

Yours faithfully,



Tammy Jones,
Researcher.

Assoc. Prof. Margaret Barrett,
Chief Investigator.

_____, 2004.

INFORMATION SHEET

Title of investigation

Support Group Facilitator Training

Name of chief investigator

This is a study being conducted as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the supervision of Associate Professor Margaret Barrett.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to investigate participants' perceptions of the impact of participation in MESH Support Group Facilitator Training on their professional work lives.

Benefits of the research

The benefits of the study may include a greater understanding of:

- the work lives of professionals in an educational setting;
- the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health support needs of professionals in an educational setting;
- the preparedness of education professionals to meet the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health support needs of school students;

and provide recommendations

- that may serve to guide teachers in engaging students with the Personal Futures component of Tasmania's Essential Learnings curriculum, and
- for curriculum development within teacher education programs.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

You have been identified as a potential participant within this study due to your facilitation of the MESH Support Group Facilitator Training professional development course within Tasmania.

Study procedures

Should you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured in-depth interview that will be audio taped. It is anticipated that the interview will last between one hour and one and a half hours. During the interview you will be asked about your perceptions of the MESH program and of its place in your life and in education. You will have the opportunity to peruse the transcripts of the interview in order that you may correct, edit, modify or withdraw data.

Confidentiality

As you are aware, due to your being the sole provider of MESH Support Group Facilitation Training in Tasmania, you will be identifiable, however, for the purpose of publication of the study, you may opt to be referred to by a pseudonym, which you are free to suggest yourself. All tapes, transcripts and computer files will be kept in a locked cabinet or password-protected computer at the University of Tasmania for a minimum of five (5) years after the completion of the study and then deleted or destroyed by shredding.

Possible risks or discomforts

The interview will be conducted with sensitivity and dignity. It is not anticipated that your participation in the study will cause you any risk.

Freedom to refuse or withdraw

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part in the study and subsequently change your mind about participating, you are free to withdraw at any time without effect or explanation. You may also choose to withdraw any data supplied to the date of withdrawal.

Statement regarding approvals

This project has received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network (Approval No. H7795).

Contact persons

If you have any **general concerns**, please contact my supervisor, Associate Professor Margaret Barrett – Phone (03) ##### – or myself, Tammy Jones – Phone (03) ##### – during business hours.

Concerns or complaints

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints, please contact the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network, Amanda McAully – Phone (03) 6226 2763.

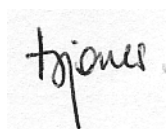
Results of investigation

At your request, you will be able to view your own personal data, be kept informed of any significant findings that may affect you, your company or the operation of the training program, and, upon completion of the study, receive a copy of the final overall results.

Information sheet

You may keep this *Information Sheet* and a copy of the *Facilitator Consent Form*.

Yours faithfully,



Tammy Jones,
Researcher.

Assoc. Prof. Margaret Barrett,
Chief Investigator.

FACILITATOR CONSENT FORM

Support Group Facilitator Training

1. I have read and understood the *Information Sheet* for this study.
2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
3. I understand that the study involves:
 - a. my business in forwarding introductory and information letters, and questionnaires, to prospective participants in the study from my business records of people enrolled in previous and up-coming three-day Support Group Facilitator Training workshops;
 - b. the researcher attending a number of three-day MESH Support Group Facilitator Training workshops run by me, in order to become familiar with the process involved, and to build rapport with participants through her involvement in the group process;
 - c. my participation in a semi-structured in-depth interviews of 1 hour to 1½ hours duration which will be audio taped. I understand I will be supplied with a copy of the interview transcript and that I will be able to correct, edit, modify or withdraw data as I see fit.
4. I understand that, while the risk is minimal, there is a possibility of my experiencing emotional or psychological distress as a result of my participation in the study, and that, at any time during the interview, I may ask for the interview to stop. I am also aware that the researcher will make herself available for debriefing should I require this, and that I will be referred to a counselling service if this issue becomes significantly problematic for me.
5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for a minimum period of five years, and after that minimum time, and when no longer required, all data will be destroyed.
6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published.
8. I understand that I may choose to use a pseudonym, but that I may be identifiable due to my official position. I understand that information I supply to the researcher will be used only for the purposes of the research.
9. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and, if I so wish, may request that any personal data gathered be withdrawn from the research.

Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

Statement by Investigator:

10. I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that she understands the implications of participation.

Name of investigator _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

21st August, 2007.

Dear Cheryl,

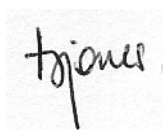
Support Group Facilitator Training

As you are aware, I am currently undertaking research on MESH Support Group Facilitator Training. This study is part of the requirements for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the supervision of Associate Professor Margaret Barrett.

This is a formal invitation for you to take part in this research, and I enclose herewith an *Information Sheet* detailing the project and the nature of your participation therein. Also enclosed please find a *Consent Form*, which needs to be signed by us both prior to your participation in the interview process.

Thank you for giving your consideration to participation in this study.

Yours faithfully,



Tammy Jones,
Researcher.
Tammy.Jones@utas.edu.au

Assoc. Prof. Margaret Barrett,
Chief Investigator.
Margaret.Barrett@utas.edu.au

21st August, 2007.

INFORMATION SHEET

Title of investigation

Support Group Facilitator Training

Name of chief investigator

This is a study being conducted as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the supervision of Associate Professor Margaret Barrett.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to investigate participants' perceptions of the impact of participation in MESH Support Group Facilitator Training on their professional work lives.

Benefits of the research

The benefits of the study may include a greater understanding of:

- the work lives of professionals in an educational setting;
- the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health support needs of professionals in an educational setting;
- the preparedness of education professionals to meet the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health support needs of school students;

and provide recommendations

- that may serve to guide teachers in engaging students with the Personal Futures component of Tasmania's Essential Learnings curriculum, and
- for curriculum development within teacher education programs.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

You have been identified as a potential participant within this study due to your founding of the Student Assistance Program (known in Tasmania as MESH) Support Group Facilitator Training professional development workshop. You are receiving this documentation via Ms Nairn Walker, the Tasmanian provider of this professional development. We have not been provided with any personal contact information.

Study procedures

Should you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in one semi-structured in-depth interview that will be audio taped. It is anticipated that the interview will last between one hour and one and a half hours. During the interview you will be asked about the reasons behind your development of the program and your perceptions of its take-up and impact on education. You will have the opportunity to peruse the transcript of the interview in order that you may correct, edit, modify or withdraw data.

Confidentiality

As you are aware, due to your being the founder of Student Assistance Program Support Group Facilitation Training, you will be identifiable, however, for the purpose of publication of the study, you may opt to be referred to by a pseudonym, which you are free to suggest yourself. All tapes, the transcript and computer files will be kept in a locked cabinet or password-protected computer at the University of Tasmania for a minimum of five (5) years after the completion of the study and then deleted or destroyed by shredding.

Possible risks or discomforts

The interview will be conducted with sensitivity and dignity. It is not anticipated that your participation in the study will cause you any risk. However, at any time during the interview you may ask for the interview to stop.

Freedom to refuse or withdraw

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part in the study and subsequently change your mind about participating, you are free to withdraw at any time without effect or explanation. You may also choose to withdraw any data supplied to the date of withdrawal.

Statement regarding approvals

This project has received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network (Approval No. H7795).

Contact persons

If you have any general concerns, please contact my supervisor, Associate Professor Margaret Barrett – Phone (03) ##### – or myself, Tammy Jones – Phone (03) ##### – during business hours.

Concerns or complaints

Should you have any ethical concerns in relation to this study you may contact the Ethics Executive Officer, Nadia Mahjouri through email at human.ethics@utas.edu.au, or by telephone on (03) 6226 7479.

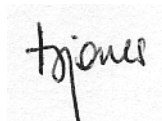
Results of investigation

At your request, you will be able to view your personal data, be kept informed of any significant findings that may affect you, your company or the operation of the training program, and, upon completion of the study, receive a copy of the final report.

Information sheet

You may keep this *Information Sheet* and a copy of the *Founder Consent Form*.

Yours faithfully,



Tammy Jones,
Researcher.
Tammy.Jones@utas.edu.au

Assoc. Prof. Margaret Barrett,
Chief Investigator.
Margaret.Barrett@utas.edu.au

FOUNDER CONSENT FORM

Support Group Facilitator Training

1. I have read and understood the *Information Sheet* for this study.
2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
3. I understand that the study involves my participation in a semi-structured in-depth interview of 1 hour to 1½ hours duration which will be audio taped. I understand that I will be supplied with a copy of the interview transcript and that I will be able to correct, edit, modify or withdraw data as I see fit.
4. I understand that there is minimal risk of my experiencing emotional or psychological distress as a result of my participation in the study. However, at any time during the interview, I may ask for the interview to stop.
5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the University of Tasmania premises for a minimum period of five years, and after that minimum time, and when no longer required, all data will be destroyed.
6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published.
8. I understand that I may choose to use a pseudonym, but that I may be identifiable due to my official position. I understand that information I supply to the researcher will be used only for the purposes of the research.
9. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and, if I so wish, may request that any personal data gathered be withdrawn from the research.

Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

Statement by investigator:

10. I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that she understands the implications of participation.

Name of investigator _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

FOUNDER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Support Group Facilitator Training

- Introduction** *I'd like to thank you for taking part in this study. I'm very interested in finding out some background information on the Student Assistance Program from you. I'll begin by asking...*
- Section 1** **During SAP facilitator training workshops, participants are told that the original prompt for your development of the Student Assistance Program was a student of yours, named Kay. Can you tell me that story?**
- Prompts: How much teaching experience had you had at that time?
Why did you choose to become so involved with Kay?
What comments did your involvement with Kay and other students in similar circumstances elicit from your principal and other staff members?
- Section 2** **How did the program come to grow beyond what you were doing in your own teaching time in your own school?**
- Prompts: What was the response of senior staff/management?
How were you able to engage the interest of other staff?
How did parents react to your program?
- Section 3** **At least one article I have read suggested that the Student Assistance Program grew out of Employee Assistance Programs. Would you describe the sources of inspiration on which you chose to base your program?**
- Section 4** **In the literature, there are many references to student assistance programs. To your knowledge, to what extent do these reflect your model?**
- Section 5** **What outcomes are you striving for in conducting Support Group Facilitator Training?**
- Prompts: For schools?
Staff?
Students?
Community?
- Section 6** **What impact do you believe the program is having?**
- Prompts: On teachers' and students' lives, in school and out of school?
Socially and intellectually?
- Section 7** **I believe that you have the program operating in a number of countries now. Where does the program currently operate and how well established are these programs?**
- Section 8** **What cultural differences are you aware of in the acceptance and take-up of the program internationally?**
- Section 9** **Can you tell me about the role of the Student Assistance Program in your life?**
- Section 10** **Would you describe the importance to you of the Student Assistance Program?**
- Section 11** **Are you aware of any studies that have been or are being conducted on the impact of the program on teachers (as opposed to students)?**
- Section 12** **Is there anything else you can tell me that might contribute to my understanding of the program?**
- Close** *Thank you again for taking time to participate in this interview. I'll send you a copy of the interview transcript.*

Interview and Transcription Progress Report

Focus Groups & Participants ¹	Interview 1						Interview 2						Interview 3					
	Date	Time Pages	Trans T ² D ³		De-ID	Member checked	Date	Time Pages	Trans T D		De-ID	Member checked	Date	Time Pages	Trans T D		De-ID	Member checked
Hobart	17-08-2004	58:15 42	✓	✓	✓	✓												
Launceston 1	24-08-2004	1:33:08 45	✓	✓	✓	✓												
Launceston 2	26-08-2004	1:44:04 57	✓	✓	✓	✓												
Kath Rivers	23-09-2004	1:01:05 45	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-10-2004	1:54:40 67	✓	✓	✓	✓	11-10-2005	1:45:33 76	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kym Oliver	23-09-2004	1:58:15 77	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-10-2004	1:56:43 78	✓	✓	✓	✓	11-10-2005	1:08:02 37	✓	✓	✓	✓
Geoff Murray	07-10-2004	1:20:45 55	✓	✓	✓	✓	21-10-2004	2:16:16 89	✓		✓	✓	4-08-2005	1:01:49 41	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jude Tomasz	25-10-2004	1:24:52 50	✓		✓	✓	4-11-2004	1:49:49 70	✓		✓	✓	10-11-2005	1:13:25 49	✓	✓	✓	✓
Patrick Jamieson	25-10-2004	1:09:25 43	✓	✓	✓	✓	3-11-2004	42:04 28	✓		✓	✓	3-11-2005	30:14+ 21	✓	✓	✓	✓
Naomi Cameron	19-10-2004	48:18 29		✓	✓	✓	3-11-2004	1:08:30 55	✓		✓	✓	3-11-2005	1:12:07 54	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vivienne Deane	25-10-2004	50:51 30	✓	✓	✓	✓	4-11-2004	56:12 38	✓		✓	✓	2-11-2005	1:25:36 47	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nairn Walker	13-09-2006	51:23 46		✓	✓	✓												
Cheryl Watkins	17-09-2007																	
Total		13:40:41 519						10:44:23 425						8:16:46+ 325				

¹ Pseudonyms are used for all participants' names, except those of Nairn Walker and Cheryl Watkins.

² Audio-tape recording

³ Digital audio recording

